

Gems Without Measure A Pirate's Treasure

by drillmaster

In this sequel to A Gem in the Rough, Steven has been summoned back to the Grand Line due to his status as a Straw Hat. With a bounty on his head and a song in his heart, what new adventures with Steven and the gang go on now? Steven Universe was created by Rebecca Sugar. One Piece was created by Eiichiro Oda. Additional story ideas by jmr46718. Official art by CyanideOreo. Rated: Fiction K+ - English - Miss Goldenweek, Straw Hats P., Steven U., Connie M. - Chapters: 32 - Words: 262,577 - Reviews: 496 - Favs: 281 - Follows: 270 - Updated: 12/25/2017 - Published: 4/12/2016 - id: 11893050
URL: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11893050>

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

1. The New Adventure
2. The Family Barn
3. The Straw Hat Reserve Team
4. The Rule Book
5. The First Round
6. The Second Round
7. The Third Round
8. The Duel Between Captains
9. The Morning Dilemma
10. The Harsh Reality
11. The Internalization of Amethyst
12. The Soothing Mist
13. The Blue Pheasant
14. The Reforming
15. The Dream Island
16. The Treasure Chest
17. The Cryptic Swaying Song
18. The Invitation from Lord Ratchet
19. The Castle on the Turtle's Back

20. The Golden Crown
21. The Three Syllables
22. The Jam Buds Date
23. The Stolen Briefcases
24. The Barrage of Emotions
25. The Nighttime Conversations
26. The Number One Super-Guy
27. The Musician and the Archaeologist
28. The Long-Dead Apprentice
29. The Adventures of the Baroque Works Trio
30. The Feroicity of the Aqua Laguna
31. The Crime of Existence
32. The Call on the Private Line

The New Adventure

A GEM IN THE ROUGH

Part Two:

GEMS WITHOUT MEASURE; A PIRATE'S TREASURE

It is a period of great worry. After stopping the Shishibukai CROCODILE in the Alabasta Kingdom, STEVEN UNIVERSE found himself back in his home dimension. However, he was unexpectedly joined by his newest allies: THE STRAW HAT PIRATES.

After several days in BEACH CITY, Steven and the Straw Hats captured the CRYSTAL GEMS' most hated enemy: PERIDOT. Though it seemed like a great victory, she informed them of a greater threat: THE CLUSTER, a Gem weapon designed to blow up the planet from inside its own core.

With the Straw Hat returned to their home dimension, Steven finds himself forced to rely on his friends and family to stop the Cluster from emerging and to save the planet. Little does Steven know that his quest will be diverted by a most dangerous game taking place at this very moment in the heart of the GRAND LINE...

"The first match of the Davy Back Fight has officially ended!" the voice of an announcer called out through the island. "Now it is time for the moment we all have been waiting for: the highly anticipated selection of a new member of our crew!"

This was the scene of the most deadly of games that can be played on the Grand Line: the Davy Back Fight. It required two crews of pirates to accept a challenge against each other for three games of strength and wits. The stakes of the game? The crew themselves. As such, it is a horrifying game of chance that only the cocky and foolish would dare to risk...

Which is why the Straw Hat pirates inevitably found themselves on

the losing end of the first challenge.

After being tricked by the devilish Foxy (also known as 'Foxy: the Silver Pirate'), Monkey D. Luffy was forced to compete, putting his crew of eight on the line. The crew, not counting himself, consisted of Zoro, Nami, Usopp, Sanji, Chopper, Robin, and Genevieve, the former Miss Goldenweek. It was a dark time for the Straw Hat crew, especially since they lost the first challenge of the game: the Donut Race. Now they were forced to sit back and wait to see who would be forced to join Foxy's crew lest they be cast to a quick, underwater death.

"The captain of the winning team will choose a new member of the crew from the losing team," Foxy's announcer continued as several drummers helped build up anticipation. "Who is it gonna be, boss?!"

Foxy was an interesting looking pirate. He wore a high collar jacket and ornate pants held up by suspenders. A pistol was held in the front of his pants, showing his lack of fear in any situation. His most notable features, however, were his face and hair. He had a square chin, a toothy grin, and one of the longest noses ever recorded in the world. His hair was parted into two even spikes, giving off an otherworldly appearance.

Each of the Straw Hats held their breath as they waited to see who would be taken from them. The only three that seemed unconcerned were Robin (who was stoic), Genevieve (who was too busy painting), and Zoro (who was drinking a bottle of rum to his face). At last, the dreaded pirate theatrically pointed at one of them and laughed. "The first one that I will take is..." He paused for dramatic effect and cried out his choice triumphantly. "YOU! TONY TONY CHOPPER: THE DOCTOR!"

"What?!" Chopper asked, not fully comprehending the situation.

Two of Foxy's many crewmen grabbed the tiny talking reindeer and forced him away from Nami and straight into Foxy's arms. The pirate started to hug and squeeze him with all of his might. "Aw; ain't you just precious! You are the cuddliest pet I have ever had; yes, you are!"

"Boss, please let me have him! He's so fluffy; I'm gonna die!" a blue-haired woman begged her captain.

"Of course, Porche!"

The sight of their doctor being forced into a black mask was nearly unbearable for the Straw Hats. "They think he's some kind of rare pet!" Nami said. "That's deplorable!"

"As long as they aren't into rare pelts we should be okay," Robin said with a straight face.

"DON'T JOKE LIKE THAT!" Usopp yelled. "CHOPPER! WE ARE SORRY WE FAILED YOU!"

The reindeer was forced to sit down next to his new captain underneath a giant tent in the shape of a fox that had a sign that said "Davy Back Fight." he began to sob nearly uncontrollably before finally cracking. "YOU GUYS! THIS...I DIDN'T WANT THIS WHEN WE SET OUT! I STARTED SAILING WITH YOU GUYS BECAUSE OF LUFFY...AND STEVEN...AND PETREA...AND..."

"Stop right there!" Foxy held his hand up and pointed at Chopper. "Steven?' 'Petrea?' Who are these people?"

"Shit," Sanji said, taking a large drag of his cigarette. "This could be a problem."

"They...they...I won't say!" Chopper gulped and turned his head away.

"As your captain, I order you to tell me who this 'Steven' is!" Foxy demanded. "Will you disregard an order from your captain?!"

"YOU'RE NOT MY CAPTAIN!" Chopper shouted angrily.

"SHUT YOUR MOUTH AND STOP BEING A DISGRACE, CHOPPER!" Zoro suddenly yelled out, putting down a half-finished bottle of premium rum. "You chose to come out to sea with us on your own accord, not just because of them. Don't blame others for your choices! We chose to do this contest and we lost. You are in a world where tears mean nothing!"

Zoro got up and looked Chopper directly in the eye despite the long distance away from them. "If you are a man, then you will stop crying and do what your captain says! If he wants to know, tell him who they are!"

"Zoro! Stop being so harsh with him!" Nami scolded him from afar. "And I don't think him knowing about Steven is a good idea..."

At once, Chopper sucked his tears back into his face, leaving it neutral and stoic. The reindeer took a big breath and explained just who Steven was. "Steven is...Steven is the musician of the Straw Hat pirates!"

"What?!" Foxy was outraged. "You have another member of your crew...and you withheld him from us?!"

"...uh..." Luffy tried to find the right words to describe the situation. "It's complicated?"

"It's against the rules is what it is! What about this 'Petrea?!' Is she part of your crew too?"

"Not really...she and Damian are more like unofficial Straw Hats than anything..." Luffy answered slowly.

"Another person?!"

"Sir! We think we know who this 'Steven' is!" a large, ape-like person ran over with two pieces of paper. "These came at the same time the Straw Hat's bounty came through!"

Foxy scanned the two documents and grinned eagerly. "'Tiger Millionaire' Steven Universe and 'Giant Onigiri Magician' Sardonyx, eh? Such high bounties...but no 'Petrea' or 'Damian.' Is Sardonyx one of yours too?"

The pirate captain looked to Luffy, who was whistling innocently. "I don't know what you are talking about!"

"YOU ARE STILL GIVING IT AWAY!" Nami yelled angrily.

"Pet Chopper?" Foxy began. "Spell it out for your captain!"

"Sardonyx...I don't really know!" Chopper fought back more tears and began to stammer as he spoke. "She's back with Steven, but not with Steven because she's actually the Crystal Gems and..."

"I think that's enough!" Foxy announced. "It is clear enough to me that the Straw Hats have deliberately falsified our records of your crew!"

"But you wrote those up yourself!" Usopp protested.

"Lies! The validity of this Davy Back Fight has been compromised! Deliberately hiding a member of the crew is against the rules! As such, you are forced to present this 'Steven Universe' and any other members of your crew in a timely manner or else risk disqualification!" Foxy roared in Luffy's direction. "Fuehfeheh! Of course, disqualification means instant victory for the opposing crew!"

"What?! So we will lose everyone in the crew if we can't bring Steven here?!" Luffy asked worriedly. "But he's not here right now! He's not anywhere near here!"

"Then do you renounce him as a member of your crew on the honor of your Jolly Roger?!" Foxy asked.

"Never!"

"Then you have one hour to present him lest you abandon your dreams and join my crew," Foxy sneered evilly. "What do you have to say to that, Straw Hat?"

Luffy looked from the emotional form of Chopper to each of the members of his crew. Their eyes revealed what he knew: there was no choice in the matter. This was a time of great need if they were to have any chance of continuing on their quest on the Grand Line. "Fine...I'll get him. Usopp, you're with me."

"Are...are we sure there isn't another way? We are tampering with dimensional rifts and..." Usopp gulped nervously.

"Steven wouldn't want us to abandon our dreams for his sake," Luffy bit his lip. "If we are to keep our honor as pirates, we need to get Steven."

"What if he doesn't want to come?" Usopp asked.

"He'll want to come. I know it," Luffy grinned. "Crew, wait here! We'll be right back!"

Luffy and Usopp ran quickly to their ship: the Going Merry. It was far more beat up than the last time Steven was aboard it, but it still had a little fight left in her. They rushed to the storage deck where they found a small salmon pink badge with a star on it. Usopp examined the badge and motioned for Luffy to press the star.

"I can't believe we are finally going to use the Steven Badge!" Luffy cracked his knuckles in anticipation. "I am so pumped!"

"I'll be pumped when this game is over," Usopp sighed. "Still, it is going to be nice to see everyone again. You ready, captain?"

"I was born ready, Usopp! WE ARE COMING, STEVEN!"

With that, he pressed the button and the two members of the Straw Hat pirates vanished, leaving the Grand Line to embark on an important task.

GWMAPT

Petrea was having the time of her life.

Mr. Smiley had rented out a small building in Beach City Funland for her to start her own little chocolate shop: Miss Valentine's Chocolates. Before she had left to join up with the Straw Hats, Genevieve had given her \$1,000 that she had made painting portraits on the pier with her newfound friend Vidalia. As the painter had returned to the Grand Line, the money was worthless to her but ended up being the foundation of Petrea's entire business. The chocolatier was indebted to that generosity, as it allowed her to buy the necessary ingredients to get her shop started.

Her living situation, however, had not been as prosperous. Though she was making money, it was not enough to afford her own apartment, let alone a house. The same could be said for Damian, the former Mr. 5. Though Delmarvan firemen were afforded a somewhat decent salary, he was technically doing the work under

the table until Mayor Dewey could clear everything up. For now, Mayor Dewey was personally handling his payments.

Damian had been meeting with Bill Dewey regularly to discuss what a full-fledged fireman would require. He was utterly fascinated to learn about a magical tool known as a "firetruck." In the meantime, Damian was working in the construction field, mainly assisting the Fryman family in rebuilding their business. It was almost finished, but still required some patchwork.

Thankfully, the two of them had found refuge in Steven's beach house. On their first night as official Beach City citizens, Steven had the brilliant idea to release the Gem known as Peridot from her bubble. The appearance of a being that Petrea helped bring down had scared the living daylights out of her, especially since she was in a deep sleep at the time. After locking herself in the bathroom all night, Steven managed to convince the Gem to come out and (after a trip to the Kindergarten) explain just what something called the "Cluster" was.

Apparently, this planet was home to some kind of Gem geo-weapon that was incubating in the planet's core. If it was not stopped, the planet would be destroyed. As such, it fell to Steven, the Gems, and (surprisingly) Peridot to figure out how to drill to the core and remove it to save the planet. The five of them had left for a barn that Greg Universe's family owned, leaving Damian and Petrea in charge of the beach house. This gave them a chance to build up their finances while having the benefit of keeping everything tidy while they were away.

But in the shop? That was a different story. Petrea had a very important job she was finishing today; something that meant a lot to her.

"Miss Valentine makes everything she bakes satisfying and delicious! Talk about your childhood wishes! You can even eat the dishes!" she sang to herself as she put the finishing touches on a very important commissioned cake. It was requested to look like a cat called "Cookie Cat."

"You never should have watched that movie," a familiar voice called

from behind her. "You've been singing that song for days now."

Petrea stopped what she was doing to embrace her oldest friend. There Damian stood, smiling and ready to give her a hug. He might be a bit sweaty, but at least he was in good spirits. "I have not! I only sing when I work! It's the allure of Beach City...every day, you wake up with a song in your heart and a spring in your step!"

"...right..." Damian rolled his eyes behind his sunglasses.

"Kyahahaha! You're just still mad because I laughed at how afraid of those Oompa Loompas you got," Petrea teased.

"...they freaked me out..." Damian shuddered. "So, what time are we being picked up? I left the site early so I could clean myself up before we left."

The chocolatier gave him the once-over and nodded. "Wise choice."

"Says the girl with chocolate in her hair."

Petrea bent down to look at her reflection in a mixing bowl and frowned. "Every time."

"It suits you, 'Miss Valentine,'" Damian teased. "It goes well with the apron."

"Having a clean apron means that you aren't doing it right!" Petrea looked offended. "And to answer your question, Connie is being dropped off at noon. That means that Greg should be around fifteen minutes before that to make the Maheswarans happy."

"That's in an hour and a half!" Damian said frantically. "How am I supposed to clean myself up in that time?!"

"Figure it out for yourself, pretty boy. I get first dibs on the shower when I get back. Hand me those two candles, will you?" Petrea asked, pointing to a blue candle in the shape of a "four" and a red candle shaped like a "one."

"I still can't believe this is actually the kid's age," Damian shook his head in disbelief. "Why are these two separate colors?"

"Garnet was very insistent on the candle colors for some reason when she commissioned the cake," Petrea shrugged. "Far be it from me to question an alien lady who is actually sentient rock."

"Fair enough," Damian agreed. "What did you get him?"

"Besides the cake?" Petrea asked, boxing up the finished product and sealing it shut. "A G.U.Y. collecting guide. Harold told me that Steven loves those things and said that this would be right up his alley. It's hard to shop for a kid you have only known for two months in a world you have only lived in for one."

"Tell me about it. I just got him cash," Damian said, pulling out a card.

"Damian! How rude are you?!"

The bomb-man threw his hands up defensively. "What?! This was a week's worth of pay! I'd rather him get something he wanted!"

"He is the kind of kid who would rather value a gift you personally picked out for him," Petrea groaned and shook her head. "It's like you don't even know him."

"Again, we've known him for two months...one of which he has been holed up in some farm!"

"What does that even mean?"

"It means...damn it; I miss him, okay? There, I said it!" Damian sighed and went to sit in a chair, which Petrea took from underneath him.

"As cute as that is, there is no point in sitting when we are running behind. Grab the cake while I close up shop." The blonde suddenly got into his face and gave him a serious look. "If you drop this cake, I will drop you. Are we clear?"

"Crystal," Damian gulped.

*GWMAPT *

The speakers in Greg Universe's van were blaring as he prepared himself to get to the beach house as fast as he could. He had just closed up his car wash (It's A Wash) for the weekend, waving goodbye to Yellowtail, one of his best friends in Beach City. This was a time that meant a lot to the man; it was not every day that one's child turned fourteen years old. It was up to him to drive Petrea, Damian, and Connie Maheswaran to his old family barn where the Gems and Steven were held up. Connie was Steven's closest friend and was a young girl who Greg admired very much. He respected how she treated him and especially how she made Steven feel.

It made an old man proud. Of course, this old man was now running late and he knew it.

"Gah! I know I put my good shirt around here somewhere..." Greg told himself as he ruffled through a large pile of clothing bunched up in the back of the van.

Despite making a decent living with his business and even some residuals from the few songs of his that actually sold, Greg had settled on a life that involved living out of a van that was parked next to the house he helped build for his son. Most of the money he made went to Steven, and Greg was happy with that. Lately, however, Greg had been toying with a way to gain a little bit of extra income doing what he loved the most: making music. It involved just that: the ability to make music.

Greg had recently eaten an otherworldly object known as a Devil Fruit. With only one bite, the eater would gain a brand new ability or power set with the trade-off of losing the ability to swim. After a series of convoluted events involving Yellowtail's son, a reality warping man with a talking fanny pack, and his son's pirate crew; Greg was given the power of the Rhythm-Rhythm Fruit. This allowed him to generate and control all forms of sound, music, and even rhythm itself. For a musician like Greg, it was a dream come true and he was having a blast figuring out his new abilities. It was like playing with a new toy, only on a grander scale. In his case, he was working on remastering and reworking several of his old songs to shop them around to anyone who would listen.

But today was not about his music; it was about his son.

"Hmmm...the white polo it is! Schtoo-ball is just gonna be happy to spend time with his groovy old man," Greg chuckled to himself as he stuffed his balding head out of the aforementioned white polo.

"There! Perfect! Now all I have to do is hope that Bonnie and Clyde have their act together for when Priyanka drops off Connie in...oh my goodness! I'm not gonna make it!"

With that, Greg grabbed the *Dog Copter III* movie that he bought Steven and got the van started. He prayed that Petrea and Damian were not running as late as he was. He liked the two well enough and had tried his best to help them get acclimated to their new home. It struck him a bit strange that two former killers who were ten years older than Steven gave up their old lives to live in Beach City with their friend, but who was Greg to judge when he did the same thing...especially when the difference in age was in the thousands in his case. To be fair, he did it for love and they did it to follow their dreams, but technically they were the same thing on some level.

After a short drive, Greg found himself in front of the beach house. Thankfully, he did not see any sign of Connie or her parents. He got out of the van and ran up the steps, praying that this would all work out smoothly. Connie's parents were a bit strict and it took a lot of convincing to get their permission to let her sleep over for the weekend. This meant a lot to both of them and he wanted to see everything go perfectly.

"Hey, you two! Hope you are ready to go because the van is gassed up and ready to...GAH!" Greg opened up the door to announce his presence and was greeted with a most random sight: the pirates Monkey D. Luffy and Usopp conversing with an equally surprised and shocked Petrea and Damian. "What the heck?! How...why...I...what?!"

"Hey, Mr. Universe!" Luffy waved excitedly. "Is your son home?"

"Luffy?! I...what are you doing here?!" Greg asked anxiously. "Did you two know about this?!"

"Not at all!" Petrea shook her head and waved her arms defensively.

She had dressed up in an orange dress with yellow frills while, surprisingly, keeping her hair hidden in her work bandana. "They just warped here mere moments ago! I didn't even have time to do my hair yet!"

"...I'm sensing a feeling of being unwanted here..." Usopp pointed out. "Did...did we interrupt something?"

"And where's Steven?" Luffy looked around the house. "I don't see him anywhere!"

Greg ran his hands over his head and began to pace. Though Priyanka did not have any ill-will toward the pirates, she did have a problem with Connie getting involved in unnecessary fights. If two members of the Straw Hat crew were in the beach house, something serious must have happened. He gulped and took a seat next to Damian, who had a pink button up shirt on with a black bow tie. "I...you guys just have to excuse me. Trust me; I love you guys and I'm thrilled to see you...but Priyanka is about to drop Connie off to spend the weekend and I really don't want her to say that she can't go and..."

"Go where?" Luffy asked curiously. "Where are you guys going...and why are you in a silly shirt, Damian?"

"Don't. Mock. The. Shirt!" Damian growled. "This shirt was expensive, damn it!"

"It's still silly!" Luffy laughed.

"...I'm beginning to remember why I initially set out to kill you..." Damian twitched his eyebrow.

Petrea hit him in the arm and gave him a dirty look. "There will be none of that! This is a very special day and we will keep it special no matter what!"

"Why is it special? What's going on?!" Luffy was practically begging now.

"It's Steven's birthday, Luffy," Greg explained. "We are heading out to the family barn and throwing him a party..."

"IT'S HIS BIRTHDAY?! YOU GUYS ARE THROWING HIM A BIRTHDAY PARTY?!" Luffy started to jump up and down like an excited child. "THAT IS GREAT!"

"Stay focused, Luffy!" Usopp scolded him. "Birthday parties are great, true, but we really need Steven's help!"

"...I feel like I'm going to regret asking this...but with what?" Greg asked, praying that it wouldn't be too life-threatening that he could put a positive spin on it if he had to explain it to Priyanka.

"We got challenged to a Davy Back Fight and..." Usopp began before getting cut off.

"And you ACCEPTED?!" Petrea yelled. "Are you kidding me?!"

"Do you have any idea how stupid you have to be to...?" Damian started to join in before stopping himself. "Never mind. How bad is it?"

"We just lost Chopper in the first round and..."

"YOU LOST CHOPPER?!"

Luffy and Usopp began to speak again but were stopped when the sound of a cymbal crashing filled the room. Greg, who had no idea what was going on, had clapped his hands to get their attention. "In case you forgot, I'm not from the Grand Line or wherever you guys came from! Stop leaving me in the dark! What the heck is a Davy Back Fight and how does this connect to Steven?"

"A Davy Back Fight is essentially a game of physical challenges where, instead of betting money or points, you bet the members of your crew...and it seems our lovable idiot captain has found himself engaged in one," Petrea elaborated.

"Oh...okay. That's not as bad as I thought..." Greg took it all in.

"Yeah...but we may have accidentally revealed that Steven is an official Straw Hat pirate and he may be forced to compete lest we become members of Foxy's crew..." Usopp gulped, not really wanting to let Greg know how desperate of a situation they were

really in.

"...what?!" Greg asked. "Are you telling me that Steven is the only thing standing in between you and losing the crew?"

"...yeah. Pretty much. So, can Steven come out to play?" Luffy smiled innocently.

"This...this...I..." Greg stammered uneasily. "This is heavy!"

"To be fair, I think Steven would get a kick out of it..." Damian pointed out. "It would be a pretty awesome birthday surprise."

"But what about my cake?!" Petrea whined. "It'll be ruined! I...IF YOU EVEN THINK OF TOUCHING THAT CAKE, I WILL BURY YOU!"

Luffy had finally noticed the cake and had started to make his way towards the box, eager to sink his teeth into it. He jumped away the second Petrea yelled at him, not wishing to incur her wrath. "Scary chocolate lady!"

"Well we aren't doing anything until we ask Steven. If Steven wants to participate, then who am I to deny the birthday boy?" Greg sighed. "Man, I know the Gems were working really hard on this. They'll be crushed..."

"They'll be crushed? What about me?! All my hard Cookie Cat work was for nothing!" Petrea continued to wail.

"...we could just bring the cake with us..." Usopp offered.

"Still, what do we tell Priyanka and Connie?! There is no way that..." Greg began before a knock on the door made him jump. "GAH! THEY ARE HERE!"

"You guys need to hide!" Damian shouted. "You do not want to piss that lady off!"

"OH NO!" Luffy panicked.

"...you guys are idiots. Don't you remember the one thing that

Connie's mom values honesty?" Petrea shook her head. "If you hide and lie to her, bad things will happen."

The men all opened their mouths to comment before conceding that the chocolatier was correct. The Maheswarans valued two things above all else: safety and honesty. This was turning far more complicated than Greg was expecting but he should have expected that with these pirates. He could never keep up with them, but he had a great time trying. He just didn't want to disappoint his son; be it being unable to see Connie or reuniting with his pirate friends. He knew there was a lot of stressful things going on in his life and he wanted to make sure that he at least had one perfect day.

"She's right. It's time to buck up and face it like a man," Greg gulped. "Wish me luck, fellows."

"Godspeed," they all saluted at once, causing Petrea to roll her eyes.

The elder Universe opened the door to the sight of Connie and her mother. Connie was wearing an adorable red dress and holding a wrapped present for Steven. Her mother, however, was just wearing her doctor's coat and was holding what appeared to be a defibrillator. Greg looked down at the device and discovered he lost the ability to form coherent words. "I...uh...that..."

"Hello to you too, Greg. I see you've found the defibrillator," Priyanka smiled. "It is just a precaution but one can never be sure when you are out in the wilderness."

"Uh...if you say so?" Greg returned it with a weak smile of his own. "Um...you look nice, Connie."

"Thank you, Mr. Universe! Is...is everything okay? You seem like you are going to have a panic attack," Connie asked, clearly concerned for her best friend's father.

"Um...well, you see..." Greg finally took a deep breath and opened the door. "See for yourself."

The Maheswarans looked inside, confused at first, until their eyes

landed on Luffy and Usopp. Priyanka jumped back in shock and Connie ran over excitedly. "Captain Luffy! Usopp! What are you guys doing here?!"

"Connie! Connie's mom! Hi!" Luffy waved as he found himself caught in a hug. "We need Steven's help in a game to save our crew! You should totally come too!"

"Are you looking for someone to share in a great adventure, Luffy the Gray?" Connie chuckled.

"Luffy the what?" Luffy asked confused.

"It's nothing..." Connie waved it off. "So, what kind of a game are you guys involved in? What..."

"Connie!" Priyanka said sternly. "Let your mother do the talking!"

The Maheswaran matriarch made her way to Luffy and eyed him up. She glanced over to Usopp, who backed away nervously. The other two, Petrea and Damian, looked somewhat frazzled but it was clear that they were waiting to see what would happen next. "While it is good to see you all again, I must admit it is setting off several red flags. What exactly is going on here? You are taking Steven back to that Grand Line place for a game, you say? Does Steven know about this? Did YOU know about this, Greg?"

"Nope! This just kind of happened by itself a couple of hours ago!" Luffy explained. "We have an hour to bring Steven back or else we have to join that split-head's crew!"

"...I'm going to pretend that I know what you are talking about. Are you telling me that instead of a weekend at a barn, you want Steven and my daughter to be in your world playing some weird party game?" Priyanka pried.

"...yes?" Luffy shrugged.

"And is it dangerous?"

"Well there is a combat match, but that's just me and split-head. The other matches are just games...I think. I'm not gonna lie, I don't

know," Luffy admitted. "But I don't want to lose my crew or forswear Steven! I'd rather die!"

"As admirable as that might be, you have just asked my daughter to join you in another dimension where I will not be able to come to her aid," Priyanka looked to Connie and then to Luffy. "You do realize that, don't you?"

"Why don't you come too? Didn't you want to watch her sword train or something?"

"In a controlled environment, young man! This is completely different!" Priyanka tapped her foot as she had an internal struggle within herself. "I...I can't believe I'm about to say this but...is there any way that Connie could just WATCH instead of participating in the game if it was even the slightest bit dangerous?"

"What?" Greg, Damian, and Usopp said at once in disbelief.

"Get out," Petrea blinked in surprise.

"Mom...are you serious?!" Connie's jaw dropped. "You would actually consider letting me go with them?!"

"Only if Steven's guardians were there as well!" Priyanka rubbed her temples in anguish. "I...I don't know how comfortable I feel with this, but I promised to trust you more and I promised you time with Steven for his birthday. I can't renege now after that."

"Why don't you just come too?" Luffy asked again innocently. "I can make sure that they know you two aren't part of my crew!"

"Unfortunately, I work this weekend...and Doug is out at a conference and can't be reached for a few days..." Priyanka sighed. "This is hard for me, but I want to be a good mother and being a good mother means letting go from time to time. I'm putting a lot of trust in you, Connie. Promise me that you will take care of yourself!"

"Ye...yes, mom! Of course!" Connie started to tear up. "I'm going on an adventure!"

"ALRIGHT!" Luffy cheered. "WE'VE GOT CONNIE! WE'VE GOT

CO..."

"However, there is one other condition, young lady!" Priyanka added sharply. The people in the house held their collective breaths, curious to hear the doctor's stipulation.

"What is it?" Connie gulped.

"You will bring the defibrillator, oxygen inhalator, extrication collar, cervical collar, valve face shield, disposable resuscitator, tri-panel knee immobilizer, arm slings, and the spare medical bag with you! I may not be there, but I am sure that the nice reindeer can figure out the advanced technology without a problem," Priyanka told her flatly. "Are there any objections?"

"Not at all, mom!"

The woman shifted her gaze to the others, who quickly agreed. The only one who didn't was Luffy, but that was mainly because he had no idea what any of that stuff was. "Uh...is that all doctor stuff?"

The elder Maheswaran took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes. Yes, it is. Your doctor will know just what to do with most of the equipment."

"Then let's get Steven here so we can win Chopper back!" Luffy grinned like crazy while Priyanka failed to catch the comment about Chopper. "So, where is this barn?"

"About a half hour drive out," Greg scratched his head. "I don't know if that's enough time to get Steven and come back..."

"Don't they have a warp pad there? Oh, what about Lion? Isn't he with them? Couldn't he teleport them here or something?" Petrea suggested.

"Not a bad idea," Greg nodded and frowned. "You know we still haven't even asked the birthday boy what he wants to do yet, right?"

"Steven doesn't know about this yet?" Connie asked.

"Not at all. Nobody does over there. We aren't going unless he gives

the word..." Greg sighed. "I guess there's only one thing to do."

The musician ruffled through his pockets and pulled out his cell phone. He pressed a few numbers and put the phone to his ear. After waiting a minute, Greg began to speak. "Hey, birthday boy...yes, Connie is here...um...sport, I've got a weird question for you...how set are you on having your party at the barn?"

The Family Barn

Today was the day that Steven had been waiting for all month: his birthday.

Upon releasing Peridot from her prison, Steven and the Gems almost immediately found themselves put to work in the old family barn. It was up to them to save the day again; this time, however, they had the added bonus of Peridot. The half-Gem was doing everything he could to make her feel welcomed, but there were times where she seemed to be more frustrated and confused than happy. Still, Steven knew that he would get to her in no time. Sooner or later, she would realize how great the planet Earth was and how much fun it was to be a member of the Crystal Gems with Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl.

And Steven!

Today, though, was a day that Peridot decided to sit out for and with a good reason. She was taking care of working on the drill while the Gems focused on the party. The Gems continued to insist that it was fine to take a day off from building the drill to celebrate Steven's birthday not only to inject some much-needed levity in their lives, but because Peridot could keep them on schedule if she worked alone. Steven wished that she would at least join in for a bit of the fun, but he wouldn't pester her if she said no.

The party was something Steven was looking forward to immensely. At first he was mainly excited to see Garnet unfuse into Ruby and Sapphire like she was planning on, but that got changed to her telling him about how she first became a fusion since he already met them twice so far. While Steven was happy with the story, it reminded him that he was not alone out there and he never would be. Being out in the farm did not allow for much opportunity to see his friends. He missed his dad's music, Petrea's chocolates, Damian's occasional puns, and Connie's...well, presence. Of all the people he missed, it was Connie that he missed most of all. Though he had texted and called her since coming to the barn, it wasn't the same as seeing her. He kept thinking about what Genevieve told

him back in Alabasta...about how it was okay to like people and to hold onto his feelings for her. He knew that Connie liked him, but did she like him as much as he liked her? To be truthful, Steven couldn't even begin to comprehend how much he liked Connie, but he knew that she was his best friend no matter what.

Who knows? Maybe they would even be like Sadie and Lars in a few years.

The Gems were setting up various banners and balloons around the barn to give off a festive feel. He knew the finishing touches would be brought about when his dad arrived with his birthday cape and crown, but there was still plenty to be done until then. He spied Lion, his pet pink lion, messing around with a balloon's string so Steven went over and tried to get him to stop.

"Lion! Don't eat the string! The balloon could fly away and it would never get to see this great party! We can't deprive it of such a glorious sight, can we?" Steven asked.

Lion merely stared at him and gave no recognition that he could understand what Steven was saying. Confident that his words sunk in, Steven went back to throwing streamers around. As he did so, Lion went right back to playing with string.

"Hey, birthday boy! We got a few places over here that could use some flair!" Amethyst called to Steven, pointing to the side of the barn.

"How could I be so blind?!" Steven ran over and decorated to his heart's content.

"Looking good, Steven," Garnet flashed a thumbs up. "I'm going to grab some birthday hats. I can get you one if you'd like."

"No thanks, Garnet! I've got to keep my hair pristine for the traditional crown!"

"Ah. I should have known. I've got one with Pearl's and Amethyst's name it though," Garnet called to her companions.

"Sign me up for one, G-Squad!" Amethyst responded.

"None for me, thank you!" Pearl shook her head and continued to tie decorative bows. "Ugh, this section is slightly off...I need to do it again!"

"Yo, Peri the Platypus! You sure you don't want in on this?" Amethyst asked the small green Gem, who was returning to the barn for extra supplies.

"...I'll pass," she dismissed her.

"Aw, come on! You should at least put on one of Garnet's cool birthday hats!"

"...if I wanted to wear a paper-based appearance modifier, I would already be doing so. If you'll excuse me, I have a drill to finish," Peridot grumbled to herself as she returned back to work.

"...lame," Amethyst rolled her eyes. "Say, when's Greg gonna get here with that cake?! I'm famished!"

"Cake?" Steven asked.

"Amethyst! Don't ruin the surprise!" Garnet snapped a paper hat on the purple Gem's head.

"Ow! That smarts!" Amethyst rubbed her hand on her head.

"I'm getting a birthday cake?" Steven started to get even more excited.

"Steven, isn't that a traditional part of the birthday celebration?" Pearl inquired as she wrapped her bow again.

"It is, but I don't expect anything from you guys...except your love!" Steven blushed.

"You don't have to wait for your birthday for that, Steven," Garnet made her hands into a heart.

"Oh, you!"

At that moment, Steven's pocket began to vibrate. He pulled out his

cellphone and saw a picture of his father and him making silly faces together. "Hey! My dad is calling!"

"Cool. Gregg is probably on his way...WITH FOOD!" Amethyst licked her lips.

"That means that he is with Connie!" Steven said excitedly. He picked up the phone and answered it. "Hey, daddy-o!"

"*Hey, birthday boy,*" Greg replied on the other end.

"Are you on your way? Is Connie with you?!"

"*Yes, Connie is here...um...sport, I've got a weird question for you...*" Greg asked in a concerning voice. It was readily apparent to Steven that something was up, but perhaps it factored into his surprise cake.

"I've got a weird answer for you!"

"*...how set are you on having your party at the barn?*"

The question caught Steven off guard. "...what?"

"*Yeah, I know. Just...do you really care WHERE your birthday is as long as everybody is there to celebrate it with you?*" Greg tiptoed around what he was trying to ask, much to Steven's confusion and concern.

"Dad, you're scaring me. What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"*I...that is to say...Steven, I think you need to know that something unexpected happened...and I need your opinion on it,*" the man sighed on the other end of the phone. "Um..."

"Steven, is everything alright?" Pearl looked up and saw Steven's worried gaze. "Did Greg get a flat tire or something like that?"

"I don't know! I think something happened and..." Steven started before Pearl motioned for him to give her the phone.

"Greg, it's Pearl. What is the matter?" she asked into the phone.

Steven tried his best to listen in as Pearl nodded her head to whatever his father was saying. He knew that something was going on and it bothered him greatly. Had something happened to Connie? Were they in trouble? Did...did she not want to come to see him?

"You have WHO at the house and they want to go WHERE?!" Pearl freaked out, causing Steven to jump. "How...what does that even mean?!"

"What crawled up Pearl's backside?" Amethyst asked, mildly amused.

"I don't know..." Steven frowned. "I guess somebody is at the beach house..."

"OUT OF THE QUESTION! We are NOT leaving this party to go play some silly pirate game in another dimension!"

The second Pearl said the word "pirate," Steven dropped the streamers he was holding.

"Pirate?" "Dimension?!" Ahhhh!" Steven started to smile uncontrollably as his eyes widened into stars. "Is it true?!"

Amethyst looked from Pearl to Steven and made the connection rather fast. "Woah! Those guys are back?! Are they coming to the party?"

"They knew it was my birthday?!" Steven started to clap. "Was that the surprise, Garnet?"

The tall Gem was quiet as she took in the bits of the conversation she could make out. The idea that the Straw Hat pirates were once again interacting with this world made her curious and worried at the same time. The stipulation for bridging their two worlds was that it would only be done in times of great need, so what could be so important that they would call upon them again so soon? "It is a surprise alright," she managed to get out.

"Pearl, may I please have my phone back?!" Steven went to retrieve his device but Pearl continued to talk into it.

"Tell Monkey D. Luffy that he can play with Steven when we aren't trying to save the world or throw a birthday party. Today is not a good..."

"PEARL!" Steven yelled, causing the Gem to jump. "May I PLEASE have my phone back?!"

The Gem opened up her mouth to protest, but looked over to Garnet. The fusion pointed to a balloon that read "Happy Birthday" and shrugged. Pearl, realizing that she had no choice, returned the phone to Steven.

"Thank you!" Steven gave her a smile before taking a big breath. "Dad...is it true? Is Luffy there with you?"

"...yeah...yeah, *he is*," Greg responded.

"*Is that Steven?!*" a familiar voice called from the background. "*Steven! Happy birthday, dude!*"

"LUFFY!" Steven loudly exclaimed. His eyes began to water up as he took in the sound of his captain's voice. "Leaping lizards, it IS you! I...did you know it was my birthday?"

"*Let me put you on speakerphone, Schtoo-ball. I think this will be easier if he explains it...*" Greg mumbled into the phone. "*Okay! If you two talk, he'll be able to hear you!*"

"**HEY, STEVEN! IT'S ME: LUFFY!**" Luffy's voice blared loudly into Steven's ear, forcing him to remove it temporarily. "**CAN YOU HEAR ME?**"

"*You don't have to yell into the thing!*" the voice of Damian growled at the other side, making Steven even happier.

"I can hear you guys! I can't believe it! This is the best birthday surprise ever! Is everybody there?" Steven asked enthusiastically.

"*Just me, Steven!*" Usopp chimed in. "*Listen, we need your help! Are you a brave enough pirate to save Chopper from a split-haired pirate named Foxy?*"

"Am I?!" Steven responded. "What do you need me to do, Usopp?!"

"We need you to help us win a few rounds of a game called the Davy Back Fight. If we win the next round, we can get Chopper back! The only problem is that we need all of our crew there and, technically, you are still part of our crew!" Usopp continued to elaborate.

"...that sounds AMAZING!" Steven grinned ear to ear. "But what about dad or Connie or the Gems or..."

"I'm here, Steven!" Connie's voice filled Steven's ears, causing him to blush. *"Petrea and Damian too! We all will join you if this is what you want to do!"*

"Really?! But what about your mom? I thought that it took a lot to even get you to come to the barn for the weekend?"

"I am fine with it, Steven," the voice of Priyanka joined in. *"However, only on the condition that the Gems come along too and Connie brings a few necessary pieces of safety equipment."*

"Dr. Maheswaran?! Really?!"

"Really. And happy birthday, Steven. I hope it is a memorable one...and a safe one..." There was a deep pause and an audible sigh. *"Take care of her, okay?"*

"Always, Dr. Maheswaran," Steven pledged.

"Steven, this is very important!" Usopp yelled, ruining what could have been a tender moment over the phone. *"We need to get back to the Grand Line in...really?! A half hour?! Steven, get Lion to transport you and the Gems back to your beach house so we can get to the arena!"*

"What?! That fast?! Okay; no problem. I'll be there faster than you can say 'Bungacowa!'" Steven nodded to himself. "Love you!"

He returned his phone to his pocket and looked at the Gems. They appeared to be hanging onto his every word, trying to make out what was going on. Finally, Steven got the courage to speak. "Guys,

I really, really, REALLY love and appreciate how the barn looks and what you are doing for my birthday...but...but..."

"We understand, Steven," Garnet put her hand on Steven's shoulder. "A pirate's life is a wonderful life, but an ever-busy one. We won't be hurt if we do this...but you WILL get a proper birthday party from those pirates before we leave or else they will deal with me."

The half-Gem started to tear up again and ran to hug Garnet, thanking her and the others profusely as he did so. Finally, he ran into the barn incredibly fast. "I'm gonna grab my Cheeseburger Backpack, my ukulele, and a change of clothes! This is gonna be the best birthday ever!" He looked around and spied Lion continuing to play with the balloon. "Lion, I'll let you keep the balloon if you please take us back to the beach house in a few minutes!"

As Steven was rummaging around in the barn, the Gems exchanged glances as they took in exactly what they were about to do and where they were about to go. "So, this is like a pirate game or something?" Amethyst started to laugh. "Those guys are always a riot! Who thinks of this stuff?"

"This...we aren't seriously considering doing this, are we?" Pearl scoffed. "This is so inconvenient and out of the way! It is one thing to allow a day of celebration for Steven, but who knows what will happen over there? We could run the risk of becoming seriously behind schedule in the construction of the drill!"

"True as that may be, it is Steven's birthday. If he wants to join the Straw Hats in some kind of pirate game, then we aren't going to stop him. Besides, there are two ways we can look at this," Garnet pointed out.

"And what, pray tell, would that be?"

Garnet held up a single finger. "Number one: this serves as a birthday that Steven will never forget and lets our boy see his friends again, keeping him in good spirits." She then put up a second finger. "Number two: the Grand Line has far different technology than even we have in this world. We could easily appropriate some compatible

material while we are there to expedite the building process for the drill."

"There is merit to that..." Pearl conceded. "But we have no set guarantee of what materials we could find."

"There's only one way to find out though, Pearl!" Amethyst joined in. "You know that it's what Steven wants and you know that, in the end, we are just going to end up going through with it anyway, right?"

The Gem opened her mouth to protest before shutting it and turning bright blue. "...I hate it when you are right. I'd at least like to PRETEND that I have a say in this matter..."

"Duly noted," Garnet nodded. "There is still one final thing we need to discuss..."

GWMAPT

Today was a day Peridot was looking forward to for some time: Steven's yearly celebration of coming into existence.

For the others, this was a chance to parade around like fools while wearing odd appearance modifiers and partaking in all manner of things humans perceive to be "fun." While Peridot conceded that there were a lot of beautiful and remarkable things living on Earth, she failed to see how such amusements were considered enjoyable. Parading around like pebbles was not something she found entertainment in...

Building the drill in peace was.

She was free for a full day away from the Crystal Clod...err...Gems. It was true that she did not despise them nearly as much as she had when this mission to Earth began; she found their antics to be rather stressful and weary. Her Facet type was not meant to endure such levels of enthusiasm and insanity. It was hard enough to comprehend the fusion called Garnet, whom she initially perceived to be nothing more than an offensive abomination. However, the past few Earth weeks had shown her just how pleasant a Gem

Garnet could be...in small doses. The same could be said for the Amethyst, though her peculiar behavior often made little to no sense to a Gem such as herself.

The Pearl...well, she was trying to be nice. It was appreciated.

Steven was a completely different type of Gem, and Peridot did not mean that solely due to his organic half. He did everything he could to explain this planet and its customs to her and she was beginning to see just why the Crystal Gems would want to stay here. The ecosystem was rich and full of all kinds of life. Everything was just so...unique. For a Gem who came from a set caste system, it was a lot to take in. But taking it in was something that Peridot relished and she hoped that, one day, she would have a fuller understanding of every aspect of this planet.

But in order to do that, she needed to terminate the Cluster by any means necessary.

Igniting her torch, Peridot continued to weld together pieces of scrap metal to complete the skeletal frame of the device. It was imperative that the drill could hold itself together as it made its way through the planet core. Peridot could not be sure the exact specifications of the interior of the planet, but she knew that the endurance level of the drill needed to be as high as possible if they were going to have a chance at beating it.

She had to admit that it pained her to go against the express desires of her Diamond, but there was no choice in the matter. There was no way to contact Homeworld and there was no way for Yellow Diamond to interfere directly with her work. A being as high and mighty as Yellow Diamond would never sully herself with such a task. However, Peridot knew that she would understand exactly WHY she would need to terminate the Cluster, especially given her profound objectivity. A being with clarity such as hers would probably praise Peridot for correcting such a serious oversight like this and would see why the Earth had so much untapped potential.

This inevitable praise is what kept Peridot going. Nothing was going to stop her now!

"Peridot!" the fusion called to her. Peridot put down the torch and regarded her. She was not alone, as she brought the other two Gems with her.

"Oh. It's you, Garnet. I told you before, I have no desire to wear one of your silly paper things while I work. It is detrimental to my productivity..."

"Yeah...about that...want to take a break?" Amethyst asked and smiled. "We'd really like you to take a break."

"...no thank you. Any further distractions would get us off of our projected time frame. I already wished Steven a 'happy birthday' so I could keep focused here. Now shoo!" Peridot motioned for them to leave. "Why don't you hang up some of those decorative pieces of paper on the wall? I am sure Steven would like that very much."

"Peridot, there has been a change of plans. We are going out for Steven's party," Garnet folded her arms.

"Oh. Is that all? Don't worry about the drill. It is in good hands. I hope you enjoy ingesting that disgusting substance the human with the shifting weight is no doubt making for you. I trust you will return by nightfall?"

"...I don't think you get it, Periwinkle. We want you to come too!" Amethyst explained. "It's gonna be a blast!"

Peridot stood there and started to laugh. "You want me....to come with you! Nyehehehe! That is rich! And why would I ever do that?"

"Because you have no choice," Garnet picked her up, causing the tiny Gem to shift and struggle in her arms. "You are on a mandatory vacation. Time to clock out."

"Unhand me, you permafusion! I refuse to take part in any trip or do anything to a device that tells the passage of time!" Peridot wailed with great effort. "I swear to you that there is no way that I will EVER leave this barn until the drill is complete!"

GWMAPT

"It looks like you are all ready to go, Steven," Garnet acknowledged the boy, who was happily carrying his ukulele and had his backpack strapped over his shoulder.

"I was born ready, Garnet! I...Peridot?! You're coming too?!" Steven put his hand over his mouth in shock. "This really IS the best birthday ever!"

Peridot was tapping her foot and frowning like a child. "...under protest. I am being forced into joining you all on whatever excursion you will be partaking in for your yearly celebration of your creation."

"You made a rhyme!" Steven clapped his hands. "I love it! You know what that means?"

"...no. Please don't. Not another one," Peridot winced, knowing what was coming.

"Singing is fun, Peridot! You'll get the hang of it sooner than you know it!" The half-Gem started to strum his ukulele as the Gems gathered around Lion, who was happily eating a piece of string.

"Going to the Grand Line! Going back, hooray! What a great surprise this is on my fourteenth birthday!" Steven sang to his family and Peridot. The green Gem groaned slightly but found herself tapping her finger in rhythm. *"I'm gonna have a great time, I'm gonna have a blast. I can't wait to see my friends again! I hope that this will last!"*

Stars filled Steven's eyes as he pet Lion, who gave a short growl of satisfaction. *"All my friends will be there, that I can't wait to see. Robin, Usopp, Sanji, Zoro and don't forget Nami! Then of course there's Chopper, and Genevieve as well. Seeing them and Luffy too will certainly be swell!"*

The boy climbed on Lion's back, prepared to finish his jaunty tune with one more reprise of the chorus before they left. *"I'll see them on the Grand Line! Oh boy, hip-hip, hooray! What a great surprise this is on my fourteenth birthday!"*

One by one the other Gems joined Steven on Lion, preparing to take

a short pause from their work to both save their friends and to make sure Steven enjoyed his special day. Regardless, Pearl and Garnet looked back at the barn warily.

"First stop: the house! After that: the Grand Line! Is everybody ready?" Steven asked.

"You know it birthday, dude!" Amethyst answered for everyone.

"Wait...I have to ask one thing..." Peridot meekly raised her hand, subtly keeping it away from Garnet.

"Fire away!"

"...what's a 'Grand Line?'"

GWMAPT

The next thing Steven knew, he was in his living room and surrounded by people he loved. It was one thing to KNOW that they were there, but seeing Connie in person brought joy to Steven's heart. As he went to go hug her, he was intercepted by a sobbing Luffy.

"Steven! I missed you so much!" Luffy cried and hugged him tight. "It hasn't been the same without you!"

"I missed you too!" Steven returned the hug. "I..."

"GAH! It's you!" Peridot screamed, pointing a finger at Luffy. "The one who can extend his limbs!"

Luffy stopped hugging Steven and cocked his head in confusion. "Uh...do I know you?"

"Luffy, that's Peridot..." Steven whispered to him.

In his head, Luffy recalled what Peridot looked like and compared it to the smaller Gem in front of him. "Uh...are you sure?"

"You are not seriously telling me we are spending an extended amount of time with these clods, are we?!" Peridot looked utterly

offended at the situation.

"Clods?" Luffy thought about it for a moment before dropping his jaw dramatically. "IT IS PERIDOT! WHY IS THERE A NEW PERIDOT?!"

"It's a long story, Pirate Captain Luffy," Garnet patted his back and gave him a high five.

"You can tell it to us when we get back to the Davy Back Fight!" Usopp stressed, shifting his gaze to the clock despite clearly wanting to hear more about the pipsqueak Peridot. "We don't have that much time left before the hour is up!"

"But..." Steven went to protest but Garnet shook her head. "...fine."

The young boy walked over to Connie's mother and jumped up for a surprise hug. "Thank you for letting Connie come! I really, REALLY appreciate it!"

"Anything for the birthday boy. All I ask is that you keep each other safe...and feel free to use any of the medical equipment in Connie's 'magical bag,'" Priyanka acknowledged her daughter, who was now carrying the bag that was given to her right before she visited the Grand Line the first time. The bag could hold far more than it looked and no doubt included Steven's mother's sword among the sea of bandages and Neosporin.

"Connie..." Steven whispered and blushed.

"Happy...happy birthday, Steven," Connie blushed as well, clutching the wrapped gift she held tightly.

"You look so...pretty!" Steven smiled.

"Stop it! You're making me blush!"

"Ahem!" Usopp called for attention. "I know it's not fair but we need to go...now! If we are late, we forfeit and all of this would have been for nothing!"

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go to the Grand Line!" Steven

ran to the Warp Pad, followed closely by Connie and Luffy.

"Wait! I'm too old for this!" Greg panted.

"...I'll leave the card here since the money is worthless there," Damian frowned. "Damn it! Petrea was right...I should have bought him a real gift...damn it! Don't leave without me!"

One by one everyone but Priyanka made their way to the Warp Pad as well, with Petrea bringing up the rear as she rushed to grab the cake. However, the Gems decided to hold back for but a moment to make certain of one thing...

"Going to the Grand Line can only mean one thing. Dark forces are at work it seems to stop our Pirate King," Pearl sang softly.

Amethyst nodded and grimaced. *"We cannot take this lightly, we must defeat our foes. If they try to attack Steven, then we will come to blows!"*

"We'll watch them on the Grand Line, and though for now we sing; we will keep our eyes open for what the future brings," Garnet concluded the brief reprise.

"Guys, come on or we are going to leave without you!" Steven called to them after hugging his father and Damian. He had tried to do the same really fast to Petrea, but she was determined to keep the cake in one piece when they made it back to their world.

"We are all set here, birthday pirate," Garnet gave a brief smile.

"Take care of yourself!" Priyanka called to them. "Stay safe! I'll be thinking of you every minute at the hospital! Take lots of pictures! Remember: I love you, Connie!"

"I love you too, mom! I'll be back before you know it!" Connie waved. "Just you wait and see!"

"Lion, you are the man of the house while I'm gone! Don't miss me too much!" Steven yelled to his lion right as Pearl activated the Warp Pad.

"I think I connected with the Steven Badge on your ship. We are good to go," she said determined.

"YEAH! MERRY, HERE WE COME!" Luffy yelled happily.

"I've made a horrible mistake. I'm going to die," Peridot started to cry to herself as she prepared for the worst.

With that, the Warp Pad glowed bright, leaving Priyanka and Lion alone in the beach house. The doctor looked to the pink lion, who yawned and plopped himself down on the floor. She knelt down and hesitated for a moment before beginning to pet him. As she did so, she looked to the Warp Pad and bit her lower lip. 'Come home safe...why do I feel that it is too much for a mother to ask these days?'

The Straw Hat Reserve Team

The storage deck filled with light as everybody returned to the Going Merry. Steven, the Gems, and Connie all managed to land on their feet while everyone else sprawled around on the floor. Peridot clutched her gemstone and began to have a mini-panic attack.

"THAT WAS NOT A NORMAL WARP!" Peridot freaked out. "We clearly transcended the fabric of time and space itself! How is that possible?!"

"Magic," Garnet dryly commented.

"DON'T JOKE WITH ME, PERMAFUSION!"

As Peridot ranted for several minutes, Steven looked around the familiar setting with awe. He could hardly believe that he was back on such a perfect ship as this. "We're back!" Steven giggled to himself.

"*A Dinosaur's Story*," Greg chuckled as he picked himself up. "Ugh, my back. Man was not meant to travel this way. Did everybody make it?"

"SEND ME BACK TO THE BARN! THIS IS TERRIBLE!" Peridot continued to wail. "NOBODY MENTIONED DIMENSIONAL TRAVEL WHEN I ASKED ABOUT A 'GRAND LINE!'"

"Isn't it great?! Can we do it again?!" Luffy asked excitedly.

"...I'll take that as a 'yes,' I suppose..." Greg sighed.

"You can stop cradling that cake like it was a grenade," Damian told his friend as he adjusted his shirt and bow tie. "I think you are fine."

"Says you! If even a single bit of white chocolate icing is out of place, I will cry my eyes out!" Petrea said frantically as she examined the contents of the box, doing her best to hide it from everyone else. "Hmm...everything looks okay...THANK GOD!" She got up and ran out of the room. "I'm putting this in the refrigerator so

we can have it after we win the Davy Back Fight...DON'T YOU TOUCH IT, STRAW HAT!"

The room was silent as the chocolatier left, leaving everyone either confused or afraid. "...she takes her job waaaaaaay too seriously," Amethyst pointed out.

"Agreed," Usopp nodded.

"I dunno...you have to respect her dedication," Garnet shrugged. "So, let's get this party started. Direct us to this 'Davy Back Fight,' Pirate Captain Luffy."

"It's outside here! Come on! The others are no doubt waiting to see you!" Luffy cried as he bolted toward the door...which he hit and fell backwards back to the floor.

"...you're an idiot," Usopp slapped his face and groaned. He helped Luffy up and found himself being dragged away by his captain at incredible speed.

"It's like we never left! Aren't you guys super excited to be back?" Steven laughed as he ran to join them.

"...yes...excited..." Pearl muttered, remembering that she was doing this for Steven and Steven alone.

"Well, if we are doing this, we should probably make an entrance to remember..." Amethyst thought to herself aloud.

"Steven would like that," Garnet nodded approvingly. "I'm up for suggestions."

"Stay on this vessel and pretend that we aren't here?" Peridot offered hopefully.

"I think I can help you in that department," Greg smiled. "It's Mr. Universe's time to shine!"

GWMAPT

"Ah! Straw Hat Luffy!" Foxy called out to the returning pirate and his

sniper. "What HAVE you been doing for the past fifty minutes? If you think reaching your companion by Den Den Mushi will work, think again! There is no conceivable way that your full crew would assemble at this point in the allotted time! Accept defeat and move on!"

"The joke is on you, split-head!" Luffy laughed. "I will never accept defeat no matter what!"

"Then present this 'Tiger Millionaire' and be done with it!" Foxy taunted. "Put your money where your mouth is. You didn't leave your ship and not a single boat has arrived. I..."

Before Foxy could continue his monologue, the entirety of the island was filled with swelling music. It was an upbeat tune, but one with a presence nobody was prepared for. Foxy and Porche looked around for the source of it and came up empty handed. "Where the hell is that music coming from?! The Fox Trot Band knows better than to play without running it by me!"

"I don't know, captain...but it's catchy!"

"IN AN UNEXPECTED TURN OF EVENTS, MUSIC HAS STARTED PLAYING FROM AN UNKNOWN SOURCE!" Foxy's announcer explained. "TRULY THIS IS TURNING INTO A DAVY BACK FIGHT FOR THE AGES!"

"...music?" Luffy asked, looking back to the ship. "Oh! Music!"

"I guess Greg is getting a grip on his powers..." Usopp nodded.

Out on the field where the Davy Back Fight arena was set up, the Straw Hats were just as confused as the Foxy Pirates. They couldn't see anyone playing music nor could they see anyone else arriving to the island. Zoro, grabbing another bottle of rum, gave a smirk as he listened to the melody blare around him. "It seems like Steven didn't come alone."

"What?" Nami whirled around at him. "You don't mean..."

"This day just got interesting," Robin said to herself.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and talking reindeer-doctors," a familiar voice boomed from the air. **"Are you ready to rock?"**

"The hell is this?!" Foxy yelled. "Who said that?!"

"I said 'are you ready to rock?!'" the male voice asked again, this time amassing a small chant from the curious and eager pirates.
"Much better! Straight from the heart of Beach City, I, Mr. Universe, present to you all the *Straw Hat Reserve Team!*"

Jumping from the side of the ship, a blonde female in an orange dress floated down to the ground while grasping an umbrella.

"Starting up is the sweet, yet deadly, ally to the Straw Hats! She can shift her weight and can crush any opponent in her way...but only if you insult her chocolate. Say hello to PETREA!"

The blonde landed and did a curtsy after blowing a kiss to the crowd. Foxy stared in shock as he tried to figure out exactly where this random woman came from.

"Up next is the fireman who can blow you away when he blows his nose! Lover of puns and destroyer of worlds, it is time to meet DAMIAN!"

A man posed with his arms crossed over his chest in an exaggerated way. He adjusted his sunglasses and followed his former partner's lead. Unfortunately for him, he missed the landing and fell face first into the dirt. As the Foxy Pirates began to laugh at him, Damian wiped the dirt off of his prized shirt and adjusted his bow tie. "...damn it!"

"Joining me up here is a non-combatant and co-spectator with yours truly. Don't take her age as a sign that she is weak though. She can cut you down to size in an instant. Here is the one, the only CONNIE MAHESWARAN!"

A young girl in a dress waved on the side of the ship and started to climb down the side of the *Going Merry*, clearly not trying to attempt the stunts that Damian and Petrea pulled. There was much confusion as Foxy tried to piece together just what the mystery voice

said. "'Non-combatant?' 'Spectator?' What is this?! What is going on?!"

"Just wait split-head. The best is saved for last," Luffy smiled knowingly.

"And finally, it is time for the main event. This is what you all have been waiting for; the reason why we are here today. But even I know I can't do them justice. Friends...meet the last members of Team Luffy!" Mr. Universe's voice blared triumphantly.

The music stopped and the crowd waited for what was promised to be a big moment. The Foxy Pirates were engaged and the Straw Hats looked on in amazement. They were clearly not expecting anyone but Steven to show up and were overjoyed to say the least. They knew what was about to happen and waited to hear the promised anthem once more after so long of being deprived of it.

"We," a female voice sang out as an instrumental piece started to accompany her. The pirates below could make out a tall woman with a majestic afro and sunglasses.

"*Are the Crystal*," two additional female voices joined in. One was short and appeared to be purple while the other was taller and decidedly more feminine.

"*Gems!*" a boy sang with them. He was wearing a salmon colored shirt with a giant yellow star on it.

"*We always save the day!*" the ladies sang in unison.

"*And if you think we can't,*" the boy sang solo.

"*We'll always find a way!*"

"*That's why the people...*" the tall one started alone before being joined by the other two ladies. "*...of this world...*"

"*...believe in...*" a new voice joined in, seemingly coming from a small girl trying to stay out of sight in the corner but being brought into focus by the tall one.

"*Garnet!*" she yelled as she jumped down with the small, seemingly green, girl clutched in her hands. She looked petrified and was screaming as she prepared to hit the ground.

"*Amethyst!*" the purple one joined them below.

"*And Pearl!*" the final female landed gracefully, holding onto the boy in her arms. She let him down and he struck a pose dramatically.

"*And STEVEN!*"

"...and Peridot..." the green one whispered and promptly hid behind Garnet as she saw a crowd of people she recognized running toward her. "Gah! Hide me!"

"STEVEN!" Nami, Sanji, Genevieve, and a restrained Chopper cried out happily. Zoro merely grinned and Robin gave a smile as the crew made their way to where Luffy and Usopp were showing off the new arrivals.

"Guys!" Steven ran over and embraced his crew as tightly as he could.

"Look at you! You look...exactly the same!" Genevieve smirked. "Who could have guessed?"

"You noticed!" Steven laughed. "Man, I missed you guys!"

"We missed you too, shitty kid!" Sanji said, ruffling his hair. "It's been too quiet without you...and helloooooooo, nurse!" The blond-haired cook moved away from the young boy and grabbed the hand of Petrea, preparing to kiss it. "Petrea-chan, my life is complete! How I longed to see you once more!"

"Sanji...how charming," Petrea gave a somewhat fake smile as she tried to pull her hand away from him. "Can...can I have my hand back?"

"And deprive me of your company already? You wound me!"

"Not yet..." Petrea muttered to herself. "The day is still young..."

"HOLD IT!" Foxy yelled, trying to break up the reunion. "What the hell was that? Where the hell did you just come from?! Were you hiding on the ship the whole time? I want answers...nay, I DEMAND answers!"

Steven regarded the pirate and looked up and down at him. Foxy twitched his eyebrow and started to growl. "What?! Do you have something to say, punk?!"

"You have the coolest hair I have ever seen!" Steven whispered in awe. The Straw Hats started to laugh to themselves as Foxy took in the surprising compliment.

"Finally! A Straw Hat I can get behind! I like this kid!" Foxy laughed and put his hand on his shoulder. "'Tiger Millionaire' Steven Universe, welcome to the Davy Back Fight! Now that you are here we can begin a PROPER..."

"Excuse me!" Steven raised his hand. "Um...not to be a bother or anything, but I don't really know what a 'Davy Back Fight' is."

"...you don't?"

"I do not!"

"Haven't you been listening to everything from the ship?" Foxy asked. "Weren't you just hiding like a coward in there?"

Steven cocked his head in confusion. "...uh...no?"

"A likely story! Regardless, I'll tell you what a Davy Back Fight is only because you complimented my hair," Foxy grinned. "The Davy Back Fight is a three round game where two pirate crews bet their flags and their crew against each other...and I have NEVER been defeated before. Behold the glory of my crew!"

Foxy made a grand gesture to the scores of pirates wearing black head gear, causing Steven to drop his jaw in amazement. "Wow! That's incredible! I...CHOPPER!"

The small reindeer had managed to get away from Porche and ran toward Steven. He jumped into his arms and gave him a large hug

as he cried. "STEVEN, I'M SO SORRY! IT'S MY FAULT YOU ARE HERE! I SHOULDN'T HAVE GOTTEN YOU INVOLVED IN THIS!"

"Don't cry, Chopper! This is a good thing! I'm happy to help win you back! We've got this!" Steven smiled, causing Chopper to cry even harder.

"Did you not just hear me, kid?! I AM UNDEFEATED! Your crew has already lost their reindeer to me and it is only just the beginning! Fuefehfeh!"

"Now hold on, Mister...Foxy, was it?" Pearl made her way to the Straw Hats and Foxy Pirates. Following her were the remaining Gems, Greg, Connie, and an irritated Damian, who had already gotten into an argument with Sanji. "There are still so many unanswered questions we have about this game and this entire situation as a whole! I assume there is a rule book I can read and..."

"Hold it! Hold it! HOLD IT! I'm still trying to wrap my brain around who all of you even are and why you are here!" Foxy cut her off. "The kid I understand, but there isn't a wanted poster of any of you and the only other names that were even mentioned were a 'Petrea' and a 'Damian,' neither of which were even considered to be true members of the Straw Hat crew!"

"Hey!" Damian growled. "What is that supposed to mean?!"

"...it means just that. You AREN'T a part of the crew officially. You made that clear. Repeatedly," Genevieve rolled her eyes. "I'm the only one who officially joined up."

"...fair enough," Damian conceded, turning bright red. "But we are here now to save your asses at the eleventh hour! You can thank me later!"

"Nobody cares, you poorly dressed idiot!" Foxy snapped. "Chopper, explain who these ladies are and everything else that doesn't make sense to me!"

"Uh...didn't you hear the song?" Chopper sniffled. "It kind of explained everything rather nicely..."

"YES, I HEARD THE SONG! I DON'T UNDERSTAND THE SONG! PLEASE ENLIGHTEN YOUR CAPTAIN JUST WHAT THE SONG WAS ABOUT!" Foxy screamed as every vein in his head pulsed.

The Gems witnessed the pirate have a mini-meltdown and exchanged looks with each other. "Does everyone in this world have to be so loud?" Pearl asked.

"Does everyone in this world have to look so weird? I mean look at that guy!" Amethyst pointed to Foxy. "He is ridiculous!"

"He does look rather...offensive..." Pearl agreed, her eyes landing on the gun sticking out of his pants. "...and seems to know nothing of proper weapons safety."

"It doesn't matter how he looks. We are here for Steven!" Garnet reminded them.

Foxy, growing impatient, shot an angry look at Chopper. The reindeer took a big breath as he prepared to explain just who everyone was. "That's Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl. They are the Crystal Gems..."

"Hold on...that name...where have I heard that name before?" Foxy tapped his finger to the side of his face.

"The song?" Luffy asked.

"ENOUGH WITH THE DAMN SONG!" Foxy roared. Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "Aha! You mentioned that name before, dear Chopper, when we were discussing the last missing 'member' of the Straw Hat crew: Sardonyx!"

"Sardonyx?!" the Gems repeated in shock and confusion.

"Aha; you wenches are found out! My lovely pet here told me that you WERE somehow that person...yet I don't see the resemblance at all," Foxy chuckled to himself before he found himself being lifted in the air by Garnet.

"Do. Not. Call. Us. Wenches. EVER!" she threatened. The pirate looked like he was going to cry as he nodded profusely. "Good little

man."

"Now, why would this...odd-looking man...know about Sardonyx?" Pearl asked.

"Did you guys forget already?" Nami pointed out. "Sardonyx is wanted for her part in the capture of Crocodile!"

The small amount of color in Pearl's face drained for a moment before she turned bright blue. "You mean to tell me that we are STILL considered fugitives?! This is so embarrassing...and infuriating!"

"Eh, I don't mind. It's flattering," Garnet shrugged.

"Flattering or not, where is Sardonyx?! I demand to meet Sardonyx before we can truly begin the Davy Back Fight once more! Then, and only then, will I determine if she is a Straw Hat! You might deny her, Straw Hat Luffy, but she would not have gotten a bounty if she was not affiliated with your crew! There is something strange going on around here...and Foxy will get to the bottom of it!"

Greg, looking around at the carnival style setting of the arena, couldn't help but let out a low whistle. "...strange does not even begin to describe this, man..."

"I beg to differ. This is amazing!" Connie took in the sight. "This is a perfect place for Steven's party!"

"True...I can't really argue with that," Greg shrugged before widening his eyes. "Is that a mutton station?! I haven't had mutton in years! I...don't have any money whatsoever here..."

"I think we can spot you, Greg," Zoro walked up and shook his hand. "Then again, Nami is rather miserly..."

"Zoro!" Connie twirled around and gave the pirate a hug, which fought at first but relented.

"If it isn't my favorite opponent," Zoro smirked. "How are you doing, squirt?"

"I'm beyond thrilled! This is going to be the best weekend ever!"

"Mr. Foxy, Sardonyx is...well, it is hard to explain in terms you would understand," Pearl frowned and tried to think of an easier explanation than the one that she was prepared to say. "It is the combined form of the two of us."

"...you're bluffing!" Foxy began to laugh. "Fuefeheh! That is rich!"

The second Foxy began to laugh, his entire crew joined in with him, mocking the Crystal Gems. "It seems that our mystery ladies have claimed that they can combine together to form the wanted criminal known as Sardonyx! Have you ever heard such a fairy tale?" Foxy's announcer joined in.

"Fairy tale?!" Pearl began to get even more flustered. "First of all, it is only Garnet and myself who form Sardonyx! Alexandrite is what happens when all of us fuse! Secondly, if you think that fusion is a mere 'fairy tale,' then you are mistaken! You know NOTHING of Gems, you..."

"Pearl, calm down. If they want to see Sardonyx so we can start this game, I don't see a problem with it," Garnet cracked her neck.

"...really?!" Pearl grinned giddily.

"Oh no," Amethyst groaned. "This is gonna make me sick."

Garnet motioned for everyone to back up and then turned around sharply. She pointed to the green Gem, who had been slowly inching her way back toward the ship the entire time. "Don't even try it, Peridot!"

"What?!" Nami asked, picking up the familiar name. "Peridot is here?!"

At once, the Straw Hats started to look around for the rogue Gem, not recognizing her without her limb enhancers. Zoro gripped his swords and everyone began to get tense until Luffy snapped his fingers. "Oh yeah! I forgot she was here!"

"YOU KNEW?!" Nami yelled.

"Yeah! She's right over there," Luffy pointed to Peridot, who tried to hide behind one of Foxy's men. The Straw Hats could not believe their eyes and just stared for a few moments without saying a word. "She's tinier now...cool, huh?"

"NO! IT IS NOT COOL!"

"Why the hell is that Gem here and not in that bubble we left her in?" Zoro asked. "I thought she was trying to kill you guys or something! You can't come back from that!"

Genevieve let out a small cough and Zoro found himself getting glares from her, Petrea, Damian, and even Robin (though not as exaggeratedly). "...okay, point taken... Still, she didn't seem that remorseful a month ago!"

"It's okay! She's good now...kind of...maybe..." Steven shrugged. "But she's working with us to save the Earth from the Cluster, so she came along with us!"

"I had no choice in the matter, you pirate clods..." Peridot hissed. "Just get this farce over with so I may return to my work!"

"Isn't she great?" Steven smiled.

"...we have two very different definitions of 'great,' Steven," Genevieve shook her head.

"What the hell is this?! There's another one now?! Where do you people keep coming from?! Who the hell is Peridot?!" Foxy looked to Porche. "Did you hear anything about a 'Peridot?!'"

"I think at the end of the song, boss," Porche admitted.

"AGAIN WITH THE DAMN SONG!" Foxy grabbed at his hair and grunted in frustration.

"...ahem," Garnet coughed, tapping her foot impatiently. "We can talk about Peridot later. All of this is just wasting time..."

"Oh! I've got an idea!" Greg chimed in. "I've been working on this killer new song as an instrumental for my next album. Why don't I

play it for you while you two fuse? It'd be my honor."

"Whatever," Garnet said as she and Pearl took their places. The pirates from both crews circled around them to give them space. "Ready when you are, Greg."

"Awesome! I call this little ditty 'Enticement,'" Greg motioned playing a piano and the sounds of fingers on ivory keys filled the air. As the piano began, Pearl started to twirl around gracefully like a ballerina on a stage. Soon it was joined by Greg replicating a drum machine, which Garnet began to gyrate her hips to. The two danced toward each other as the scene was witnessed by pirates all around them.

"This is hot!" one of Foxy's men cried out.

"Look at that one move!" another pirate shouted.

"...I have no idea what I'm looking at...but I think I like it!" Foxy conceded, causing Porche to fold her arms and puff out her cheeks.

The Straw Hats were also enticed by the movements, though for different reasons. Robin and Connie were intrigued at the process of fusion, never actually seeing it themselves (discounting Connie's own fusion dance with Steven). Nami, Genevieve, and Petrea all just looked confused at the sight while the men, save Luffy, enjoyed the sight. Luffy and Steven, on the other hand, were merely excited to see a giant woman. As for Amethyst and Peridot? They were annoyed and disgusted by it respectively.

The music ended after Garnet threw Pearl up in the air. The men let out a collective gasp as the tall Gem caught her, causing the two of them to merge in a ball of light. As the light disappeared, a tall figure stood in their place. She had four arms, vermillion skin, and triangle shaped apricot hair. Her outfit resembled that of a stage magician's and she put her hands on her hips in an exaggerated manner.

"Hello, Grand Line! This is the ravishing Sardonyx coming to you all the way from Beach City and I am just thrilled to be here on this very special day! I'm so thrilled that I need to take a giant bow! Oh ho ho ho!" Sardonyx laughed to herself as she did just that.

"Bravo! Bravo!" Steven and Luffy clapped together in unison.

"I have so many mixed feeling right now at what I just saw..." Usopp merely stated.

"You're not the only one," Petrea admitted.

"In a stunning turn of events, it seems that the two Crystal Gems known as Garnet and Pearl CAN combine into a giant woman known as Sardonyx!" Foxy's announcer explained enthusiastically.

"In all my years doing this, I have never once seen anything so beautiful and terrifying at the same time!"

"Stop it, you! You are making me blush!"

The announcer made his way to Foxy, who was staring at the giant woman in complete and utter fear. He was not moving outside of his shaking boots. "Sir, now that you have seen the lovely Sardonyx, what are your thought about her participation in the Davy Back Fight?"

Foxy did not speak for several minutes before making a giant gulp. "I...I think that she's not a Straw Hat after all..."

The Rule Book

The mood in the Davy Back Fight arena had become decidedly tense after Sardonyx split back up into Garnet and Pearl at Foxy's request. The Foxy Pirates, previously cocky and sure of themselves, began to realize that they might have bitten off more than they could chew. As such, they turned to Foxy to raise their spirits and show them that this Davy Back Fight could be won without fail. The Straw Hats, on the other hand, were merely let down.

"...that was it? That was all the Sardonyx we are seeing today?" Sanji asked.

"Seems like it," Garnet adjusted her shades. "Apparently Foxy can't handle our awesomeness."

"Aww," Luffy, Usopp, and Steven moaned together.

"Way to raise our hopes up only to shoot them down!" Damian shook his head. "It's just so anti-climactic."

"I was honestly expecting more," Zoro agreed.

"I dunno...this was everything I could have hoped for and more!" Amethyst laughed. She pointed over to Pearl, who was still as giddy as a school girl at a Vanessa Abadeer concert. "This trip is so worth it!"

"...you guys haven't even been here for a half hour and already I've seen three things I want to paint," Genevieve commented. "God, I've missed you guys."

"We missed you too!" Steven said. "I think I can speak for everybody about that."

Genevieve shot a look to Peridot, who was grumbling to herself away from the group. "...everybody?"

"Give her time!" Steven smiled. "She's still getting used to all of this! Just being here is a big deal for her!"

"...I really want to know the story behind that. The last time I saw her, she kidnapped me and took my paintbrush."

"Well, you see..." Steven began before getting cut off by Foxy, who had finally stopped wallowing in fear about the situation at hand.

"Alright! I, the brilliant Foxy, have now realized that we are dealing with a very interesting situation. As of this moment, there will be none of that...combining or whatever that was..." Foxy announced loudly. "All of you weird...things...will stay just as you are!"

"What about Garnet?" Steven asked, pointing to her.

"What?" Foxy regarded the Gem. "As long as she stays away from the orange-blonde one, the purple one, or that green one, she can participate..."

"Nice," Garnet smiled to herself.

Foxy raised an eyebrow, curious as to why she would think she could be exempt from the rules. However, he had wasted enough time and decided to regain control of the situation. "Now then! Straw Hat Luffy, I demand that you present to me a list of who is a member of your crew!"

Luffy looked to the newest visitors to the island in the Long Ring Long Land archipelago and puffed out his cheeks. "Uh...I really don't know who is officially in my crew and who isn't..."

"HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT?!" Foxy freaked out. "ARE YOU NOT THE CAPTAIN?!"

"He's trying to make a fool out of you, captain!" Porche called to him.

"He is, is he?" The pirate's eyebrow began to twitch violently. "Do you think that you can make a fool out of the most feared pirate on the Grand Line?!"

The Straw Hat pirate scratched his head in confusion. "...Crocodile? We already did that..."

The odd-looking man sank to the ground in sadness. "...I get no

respect around here...none at all..."

"DON'T SAY THAT, BOSS!"

"Split-head has a point," Zoro crossed his arms. "I don't even know which of you is joining in and which of you are just here for the sights. Care to elaborate?"

"I volunteer as tribute!" Steven raised his hand.

"...we knew that," Nami added. "That's why you are here."

"...I WANT to volunteer as tribute..." Connie said dejectedly as she kicked the ground. "My mom only gave me permission to come if I didn't participate."

"Your mother means well, Connie," Robin commented. "At least she let you come at all. Based on when we first met her, I doubt she would have entertained the idea at all."

"I guess you are right, Robin," Connie sighed. "I just want to be a Straw Hat like you guys!"

"One day, young Maheswaran, you will be cool enough to join the Straw Hats," Zoro smirked. "But not today."

"Hush, you big jerk!" Nami hit him in the back of the head. "No teasing!"

"It's okay, Connie," Greg said, walking over to the group. "I was just talking to Foxy's announcer guy, Itomimizu. He's pretty on the level and was interested in my sweet powers. The two of us are going to share commentary duties and we could use a third commentator. Your perspective might spice things up for this large, dangerous-looking crowd."

The girl began to laugh and nodded her head. "If that's what it takes to keep these pirates in line, how can I refuse?"

"Well, that is two of you down..." Nami bit her lip as Greg led Connie toward Itomimizu, where they began to mount a giant bird much to Greg's surprise and fear. "Is anyone else sitting this out?"

"Not me. I'm in," Garnet commented. "I'll be a Straw Hat."

"Really?!" Luffy clapped excitedly. "You're serious?!"

"I'm always serious."

Before Luffy and the other Straw Hats could celebrate Garnet's declaration of loyalty, Amethyst stepped up as well. "If the G-Squad is in, you can count this purple powerhouse in too! I'm ready to wreck these guys!"

"Don't forget about us," Damian put his hands on his hips. "The duo formerly known as the 'Mr. 5 Pair' is here to save the day!"

"...don't steal the Gems' slogan," Petrea shook her head and sighed. "But this buffoon is right. We'll stand by your side, Straw Hat. You finally got us to be official pirates after all."

"I am so happy right now, guys," Luffy whispered, practically holding back shouting and crying at the same time.

"What about you, Pearl?" Steven asked.

The Gem nodded and started to walk over to Foxy, who was picking himself off the ground. "I suppose I can play pirate with you all...but if you think I am going to enter a game like this without reading an official rule book, then you are mistaken."

"Uh..." Usopp interjected. "I'm not so sure that there IS a rule book, Pearl..."

"If this 'David Black Flight' is as prestigious as our opponent is making it out to be, then I am sure there is a written tome of instructions."

"...tome?" Did she really just say that?" Genevieve asked while letting out a small laugh.

"Peridot?" Steven asked the green Gem hopefully.

"Do I have a choice in the matter?" the Gem asked Garnet.

"No. You are playing along too."

"There you go. I am apparently being forced to be a 'Straw Hat' against my will," Peridot hit her head in frustration. "Will my existence ever make sense again?"

"In time," Garnet smiled.

"Mr. Foxy," Pearl called to Foxy, getting his attention. "I do believe we have a finalized count of participants in this 'David Black Flight' of yours. However, before we fully commit ourselves, I do request the ability to peruse the rules of the game. You DO have a written set of rules, correct?"

"Yeah, sure, whatever!" Foxy snapped his finger, with one of his random pirates appearing by his side. He was young with brown hair and was clutching a staff in his hands. "Phil, get me the rule book! The sooner we get this started, the sooner we can claim what is ours!"

"What? Are you that desperate for rubbers or something that you want your own rubber-man?" the pirate known as Phil joked to himself as he went to go get the aforementioned book.

"...I don't get that guy sometimes..." Foxy shook his head. "I will warn you right now that the contents are rather extensive. It would be far easier for me to just explain it to you."

"You and I probably have different views on what 'extensive' means. I will be the judge of that."

After a few moments, Phil returned with a large rule book with the words *Davy Back Fight Official Rules* emblazoned on the cover. "Here's your book. Now leave me alone. A man has to eat."

"...can't you at least PRETEND to talk to your captain with a bit of respect?" Foxy growled.

"Aye-aye," Phil gave a half-hearted salute before heading to the mutton vendor.

"That was faster than I was expecting," Pearl commented to

yourself. "Did you just have that lying around?"

"Phil has his ways," the pirate began to grin. "But enough of that! There is the book. Still not intimidated by its size?"

Pearl began to laugh. "Please. Give me ten minutes and I'll have every rule covered. If you will excuse me, some of us have productive things to do!"

"...did you just say 'ten minutes?' You are going to read that in *ten minutes*?" Foxy asked incredulously. "Is that even physically possible?"

"Ask me in ten minutes," Pearl grinned.

"...damn," Sanji took a drag of his cigarette. "Pearl is on fire today."

"So, is this like a physical contest or anything?" Steven asked the others. "Should I be doing jumping jacks or something?"

As the Straw Hats started to explain everything to Steven and the Gems, Robin decided to take a moment to walk over to the one Gem who could really use someone to talk to. The small green Gem was muttering to herself in some kind of small device. Robin tried to listen to what she was saying, but she was too far away to make out most of it. "...the permafusion now claims that I am something called a 'Straw Hat.' What that means, I know not, but it is probably something embarrassing and offensive..."

"Hello, Miss Peridot," Robin interrupted her. "You seem to be having fun."

"Gah! The human who can create limbs from nowhere!" the Gem jumped, not expecting anyone to talk to her. She quickly hid her small device. "What do you want?"

"Merely to say 'hello,'" Robin smiled and looked over Peridot's natural body. "Though I am curious about your new appearance. Is this a result of the 'poofing' or...?"

"This is my natural appearance! What you saw before was due to my limb enhancers...limb enhancers that are now unfairly lost

thanks to you and the others," Peridot folded her arms.

"To be fair, you did kidnap Steven and Genevieve...and burned down a local establishment...and nearly killed Steven's father," Robin reminded her. "Regardless of your intentions, you chose a poor way to go about achieving them."

"Is that why you came over here? Are you here just to gloat and hold your supposed superiority over me?" Peridot asked.

"No. I already told you, Miss Peridot, that I am here to say 'hello.' Believe what you want, but I do not believe I am 'superior' to you at all. On the contrary, I think of everyone here, I might be the one person who understands what you are no doubt feeling and where you are coming from."

The Gem made a derisive laugh. "A likely thought. You do not know me or anything about me. What would cause you to compare the two of us?"

"Like you, I was once on the opposing side of a war and, like you, I was accepted into the other side's fold. Of course, most of them were hesitant to trust or even acknowledge me given my own past, but here I am today as a member of the Straw Hats. I am sure that you feel like the Gems are keeping you prisoner and forcing you to do things against your will, but I think that they are merely trying to expose you to the beauties of the world around you," Robin explained to her.

"Elaborate, human."

"For starters, you may call me Robin," the pirate corrected her. "What is common or ordinary in this world can be seen as extraordinary on the Earth of your dimension. You have the distinctive luxury to see both Steven's planet and our planet in an entirely new way. However, you seem to be the type of individual who never takes a moment to look at the things happening around you unless it is pointed out to you."

"I fail to see how this 'dimension' is different than my own. The planet Earth has a surprising, yet rich, ecosystem while here is...

seemingly just a small body of land in a vast ocean of water," Peridot turned and pointed to the ocean behind the pirate ship. "It seems exceedingly simple in comparison!"

"That is because you are limiting your view based on what you see," Robin gazed out at the ocean as well. "There are so many different islands and places...do you really see so little? Just on this island alone, if you look closely at the local wildlife, you will see animals with elongated bodies in various ways that are native to this island and this island alone. It truly is a remarkable place..."

"'Remarkable?' Hardly..." Peridot scoffed, though her voice was a bit shaky.

"Hardly indeed," Robin smiled knowingly. "Perhaps..."

"That was it?" Pearl yelled to Foxy, cutting the two outsiders' conversation short. "There was barely any content in the book!"

"It seems like Pearl is finished reading the rule book," Robin motioned toward the Gem. "I suppose that means that we are finally getting this over with. Are you coming along?"

Peridot hesitated for a moment before taking one last look at the ocean. "I suppose so...Robin."

The two returned to the large group of people and Gems watching Pearl tear into Foxy about the giant, intimidating book of rules for the Davy Back Fight. "There are maybe fifty pages of actual content in this book! Every other page is just those same fifty pages repeated over and over again! Did you really think your intimidation tactic would be enough to dissuade a Crystal Gem from accepting a challenge?!"

"...yes?" Foxy shrugged.

"Can we just start the competition now?!" Porche yelled from the crowd.

"YEAH! LET'S START THE FIGHT!" the other members of the Foxy Pirates agreed.

It seemed like the allure of the sudden appearance of Steven and the others had worn off and everyone just wanted to get on with what they set out to do. This was a sentiment shared by the Straw Hats and even the Gems as well. It seemed like the only person who was still overly excited just purely by waiting was Steven. However, even he watched Pearl eagerly; waiting for her to signal that she understood the rules.

"It seems my men are getting uneasy. What do you say, 'Crystal Gem?' Are you prepared enough to officially join your captain?" Foxy asked one final time. "Or do we have to endure you rereading the book again?"

Pearl gave the pirate an angry glare before regaining her composure. "I do believe everything is in order. Captain Luffy, I am ready to offer myself to you and your cause for the duration of our stay here on the Grand Line! May I have your permission to join your crew?"

"Do you?! Of course, Pearl!" Luffy cheered.

"Wonderful! Then as of this moment, the Davy Back Fight can resume and we can begin the games again!" Foxy yelled to his crew, eliciting a cheer that could be heard all around the island. "Now, since we have so many new competitors, would my opponent be opposed with me throwing three new coins into the ocean as our offering since the original game was...dare I even say it...rigged?"

Luffy stared at Foxy, who held out three new coins in his hands, and then over to Chopper, who was being held back by Porche. "An extra chance to get Chopper back? Fine with me!"

"Luffy, that doesn't sound like a smart id..." Nami began to say before Foxy went over and shook Luffy's hand. The navigator sighed and smacked herself in the face. "Why do I even try?"

"In a shocking and unheard of move, our two captains have decided to start the Davy Back Fight fresh with three new offerings to Davy Jones himself! What a stunning turn of events!" Itomimizu cried out into his Den Den Mushi as Foxy tossed the three coins into the sea. The bird the three commentators were riding on was high in the sky,

forcing Greg to utilize his Devil Fruit abilities without resorting to the Den Den Mushi.

"I would agree with you, my newfound friend, but I'm a bit lost on this one...and still terrified to be this high above water,"

Greg announced himself, projecting his voice as if it were coming out of a microphone. **"Care to explain what the coins are for?"**

"A very valid question, Mr. Universe! Each coin represents the number of games that will be played in this Davy Back Fight! As our captains agreed on three new coins, it appears that there will be three new matches in the games today!"

"...how many coins were thrown in last time?" Connie asked curiously into the Den Den Mushi.

"Three!"

"And how many games were played before we got here?"

"One!"

"...so what happens to the coins that were already..." Connie started before being cut off by Itomimizu.

"It appears that our glorious Captain Foxy has made the decision about how this round of matches is going to be played! Let's all listen in and see what he has to say!"

The pompous pirate grabbed his own Den Den Mushi and began to speak into it in a grandiose manner. "Since I always like to have the Groggy Ring second, I think that now is as good of a time as any to start with the Run Roller Around game! I hope you all can skate, because for five rounds you will be forced to..."

"Hold on just a moment!" Pearl interjected. "Not only are you deciding all of the games, but you are deciding the order that they are played in as well?"

"Didn't you read the rules involving game selection?" Foxy sneered. "The challenging captain of the Davy Back Fight has the first say of what games will be played. It is only if the captain chooses to let his

opponent pick a game that they can choose!"

"A fine advantage indeed...except you overlooked one detail in particular!" Pearl announced. "There are ways that can allow an opposing team to have their say if the challenging captain is unwilling to allow it!"

Foxy stood there with his mouth wide-open until he snapped his fingers. "Ah! I see where you are going with this. You are referring to the section about how on special days like marriages one can make a request for a single game. A fine trick to try to get that Straw Hat idiot to marry off two of you...but the wedding would have had to already been in the works! Unless you can provide proof of the intent to wed..."

"What the hell is he talking about?" Zoro asked. "When the hell did anyone bring up marriage."

"A captain of a ship is able to perform marriages at sea," Robin explained. "I believe our opponent thinks that we are going to have a wedding purely to exploit a loophole..."

"I think I see where this is going. Nice thinking, Pearl," Garnet nodded.

"I'LL GLADLY MARRY YOU, ROBIN-CHAN OR NAMI-SAN TO HELP OUR CAUSE!" Sanji volunteered immediately.

"Wha...no, that's not what I meant at all!" Pearl shook her head.

"The terms listed on page thirty-six state that the days that qualify for 'special days' are weddings, the birth of children, and birthdays."

"Birthdays?!" Steven jumped up excitedly. "It's my birthday today!"

"Really?" Nami asked. "Steven, why didn't you say it was your birthday before?"

"I was kind of too busy being happy!"

"...that means you are my age now..." Genevieve shuddered.

"Well...for another few months..."

"This is unexpected news!" Itomimizu announced from his bird that was now only flying a few feet above them. "It seems like the Crystal Gem known as Pearl is invoking the ancient and sacred right of birthdays to allow the Straw Hats to create a game of their own! Greg, is it true?"

"Well, I don't know anything about a 'sacred right,' but Pearl is right on the money. Today is Steven's fourteenth birthday!"

Connie, who had up until this point been enjoying herself on the back of the giant bird, practically fell off of it in shock. Greg grabbed her and kept her steady. "STEVEN, YOU'RE *FOURTEEN*?!"

"Uh...yeah..." Steven responded innocently. "Did...did you not know that?"

"No! I...I'm only twelve-and-three-quarters...you're older than me?! I...I don't believe it!" Connie stammered.

"Join the club!" Genevieve called to her.

"You guys knew about this?!"

"We found out right before that whole dinner party thing with your parents," Zoro explained. "Needless to say, we all kind of had the same reaction you just had."

"I'll show you guys his birthday photo album later after the games!" Greg said proudly.

Connie looked to Steven and then to her hands. It was clear something was bothering her, but she decided not to think about it for the present moment. Right now, she knew that there were more important things to worry about.

"Hold it, hold it, hold it!" Foxy yelled. "Beyond the fact that I don't believe that this kid is older than ten, how do I know that today is his birthday? What proof do you have to offer?"

"I have my birthday cape and crown!" Steven announced.

"I have my present for him," Connie said from her bird perch.

"Oh!" Petrea practically jumped. "I have his birthday cake!"

"...birthday cake?" Foxy's jaw dropped. "You have a birthday cake... and you weren't going to share?"

"NO!" Petrea yelled. "That cake is for Steven and whoever he chooses to share it with!"

"I don't mind giving Foxy a piece of cake," Steven smiled. "My birthday is a day to share with everyone!"

The pirate, staring at this odd boy, wiped away a single tear from his face. "You would share your birthday cake with me?"

"Of course I would!"

"Fine!" Foxy raised a hand in the air. "In honor of 'Tiger Millionaire' Steven Universe's birthday, I shall allow him to choose the first game of the Davy Back Fight...but ONLY the first game!"

"Amazing! Our captain truly is a wonderful and fair man!" Itomimizu cried. As he continued to shower Foxy with praise, Greg noticed Connie's shift in attitude and gave her a nudge.

"Hey. You holding up okay?" Greg asked. "Don't get all silent on me."

"I'm just a bit taken back, Mr. Universe," Connie shrugged. "I didn't realize just how old Steven really was."

"I know. Try thinking about it on my end," Greg laughed. "Just remember, his age doesn't matter in the long run. You're still his best friend, kiddo."

"Yeah...yeah you're right," Connie nodded. "Stil...oh! Steven is grabbing the snail phone! I think he's going to announce his game!"

"This should be pretty good," Greg listened in. "The kid is just a fountain of ideas."

Back on the ground, Steven looked around and waved to all of the pirates staring him down. "Um...hello, everyone!"

"Hey, Steven!" Luffy waved.

"So, who is ready to play my game?"

"GET ON WITH IT!" a pirate angrily yelled.

"QUIT STALLING AND TELL US WHAT WE ARE DOING!" another person chimed in.

Garnet, disliking the hostile nature of the pirates, grabbed the Den Den Mushi and turned her fist into a giant gauntlet. The Foxy Pirates, seeing this display of power, immediately stopped talking. "Stop interrupting Steven."

"YES, MA'AM!" they all nodded quickly.

"The floor is yours, birthday boy," Garnet returned the Den Den Mushi to Steven and rejoined the crowd. The Foxy Pirates closest to her backed away a few feet in fear.

"Now then, this game is going to be a game of skill that will require each and every one of you to think on your feet. Prepare to run around and make fools of yourself!" Steven announced. "Who is ready to play the greatest game on all of the Grand Line?"

The pirates were all silent, waiting for Steven to finally announce the name of the game. Garnet, sensing that Steven was waiting for a more passionate response, gave a mere cough, which caused everyone to cheer loudly. Satisfied with the level of enthusiasm, Steven opened up his Cheeseburger Backpack and waved around one of his shirts.

"Ladies and gentlemen: the name of the game is Steven Tag!"

The First Round

"Reporting to you live in the sky from the Super Sparrow Chuchun, this is Itomimizu, announcer extraordinaire! Joining me up here is Straw Hat sympathizer Greg Universe!"

"It's great to be here, Ito...especially since we are not over water this time..."

"Finally, we are graced with the presence of the youngest commentator ever to commentate on a Davy Back Fight: Miss Connie Maheswaran!"

"It's a pleasure!"

"For the past forty-five minutes, we have been listening to Greg's son Steven explain the rules for the first game we are playing: Steven Tag! Now for those of us not playing (and for people like me who are still very confused) can either of you explain the rules to Steven Tag to me?"

"Don't look at me. I don't understand anything anymore."

"I think I get it...but it took looking at a drawing by Genevieve and clarification by Pearl to get to that point."

"Well explain away, Miss Maheswaran!"

"Gladly! The rules of Steven Tag are simple...in theory. The goal of the game is to turn every member of your team into a 'Steven' and gain the most points."

"How exactly does one become a 'Steven?'"

"The game begins with two teams with equal players on the field. When the referee gives the signal, Steven...I guess I'll call him 'Prime Steven' to make things easier...will be let loose blindfolded. The second he touches another player, that player will become a 'Steven.' This change will be noted by being forced to wear a replica of one of 'Prime Steven's' shirts."

"How did you all manage to get all of those shirts?"

"Pearl apparently brought this magical item called the Talisman of Cloth from our home in case the 'Prime Steven' needed extra clothing. It can create clothing from nothing...which just breaks every law of physics imaginable if you think about it."

"Remind me to ask Pearl to make a replica of my good shirt. I'm really bummed I couldn't find it."

"What did your good shirt look like, Mr. Universe?"

"Uh...it was a blue tee-shirt with some squiggly white lines on it. I wanted to wear it to the party, but I was forced to choose a polo instead...that's why they call me 'Polo-Pops' nowadays..."

"There you go, folks! Our commentator is in need of a blue shirt! We are learning so many interesting things today!"

"Exactly...like the rest of the rules!"

"Nice redirection!"

"Thank you, Mr. Universe! So the second another player becomes a 'Steven,' 'Prime Steven' will remove himself from the field and watch from the sidelines so it doesn't get confusing."

"A little late for that..."

"Anyway, when you are a 'Steven,' your goal is to tag as many players as possible so they can become 'Stevens' too. Each 'Steven' you create is a point for your team. The game ends when one team has become fully 'Stevenified.' When that happens, we will tally up the points and see which team has the highest score."

"Now hold on just a moment! It seems like the game is rigged to be in favor of the team the first player who is touched is on!"

"Not necessarily! There are rules in place that are designed to make it balanced and fair! The first rule is that every 'Steven' cannot stop running until they catch a 'Non-Steven.' That 'Non-Steven' becomes a 'Steven' and will be charged to do the same thing. Along those

same lines, all 'Non-Stevens' must keep running away from the 'Stevens' to limit cheating."

"So, the 'Non-Stevens' can't just run at a 'Steven' to change themselves?"

"Exactly! The next rule is that all 'Non-Stevens' cannot deliberately slow themselves down in order to be caught in that way either. This also applies to 'Stevens,' with the added stipulation of them being required to catch any and all 'Non-Stevens' regardless of what team they are on. The only time this can change is if there is only one 'Non-Steven' left on a team. In addition, no 'Non-Steven' may physically hit or touch another 'Non-Steven' into a 'Steven.'"

"I think I'm following along..."

"You are?!"

"Now, here is where the rules start to get a bit more intense..."

"Oh gosh! Don't tell me that! I'm still trying to figure out which Steven is which!"

"...when you become a 'Steven,' you are bound to act exactly like 'Prime Steven.' This means that unless you have the ability to create a protective bubble or a shield, you cannot use your natural powers."

"But you are allowed to if you aren't a 'Steven?'"

"Correct. The final set of rules revolve around a point I mentioned earlier. Though a 'Steven' might take a moment's rest after catching a 'Non-Steven,' they must return to continuously running. If they spend more than thirty seconds without running, they will lose their shirt, lose a point for their teams, and will be forced to become a... heh heh...a 'Pearl.'"

"What?! How the heck is that a rule?"

"Amethyst thought of it and it stuck."

"Gosh...Pearl must be furious."

"That's mainly why she is acting as the referee for this round...that and she doesn't like that 'Pearls' have to wear birthday party hats on their face to emulate her nose."

"I wonder why."

"Connie...I think I am following along. What happens when the player becomes a 'Pearl' anyway...besides wearing a hat on your nose?"

"Good question! A 'Pearl' is forced to stay in place until they are given a show of affection by a 'Steven.' This causes the 'Pearl' to become a 'Non-Steven.' From there, the game continues until the first team becomes comprised entirely of 'Stevens!"

"You heard it here, everyone! Now that we know the rules of Steven Tag, why don't we check back in on the field to see if we can make sense of this action?"

"...yeah...that's not happening anytime soon..."

"You mean we can't check in on the ongoing game?"

"No, I mean me making sense of this. I really was a poor choice for a commentator..."

GWMAPT

The field where Steven Tag was taking place was bustling with activity as each side of the competition fought to claim the coveted title of "victor."

The teams were created according to how many players the Straw Hats had to play. Because Steven and Pearl technically had to sit the game out, that meant that the Straw Hats had eleven players to participate in the sport. After realizing that eleven players were far too many to play a game of tag, both teams agreed to limit the number of participants down to five each. After much discussion, the Straw Hats decided on Garnet, Amethyst, Robin, Sanji, and Usopp to be their champions. Besides the obvious choices of Foxy and Porche, the other participants for Team Foxy included the apelike Hamburg, the green-skinned Fishman named Capote, and a woman

in a corset named Gina.

Standing in the middle of the field was Pearl, who had altered her appearance to emulate the referee from one of Steven's fighting games. She couldn't remember which one, but she distinctively remembered the man wearing a red hat, which Steven told her to cast aside after laughing at the sight. Laughter directed at Pearl had become commonplace during this round of the Davy Back Fight with Amethyst's rude suggestion of adding a "Pearl" into the mix, referencing their last game of Steven Tag where she declined to play.

However, it was beneficial that she was the referee. She had a sneaking suspicion that any person that Foxy would assign would no doubt make the odds go in their favor while making unfair calls against the Straw Hats. This way, Pearl would be able to stop Foxy and his band of ruffians from sullyng Steven's game. It also helped that she was able to comprehend each and every rule that Steven developed, which was not as hard as Steven made it out to be.

The game itself had started not that long ago. Steven had ran out onto the field blindfolded and started moving in every direction, attempting to feel for his prey. Right off the bat, Pearl spotted the female human known as Gina stumble and fall, claiming that she tripped on her heel. Not falling for it, Pearl jumped into the arena, picked her up, and brought the woman away from Steven before he could tag her.

"Hey! What was that for?!"

"Violation of the rules! No deliberately slowing down in the presence of a 'Steven!'" Pearl explained rapidly. "One more violation and it is a negative point for Team Foxy! Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," the woman grumbled.

"Wonderful!" Pearl announced as she returned to the outskirts of the game.

By this point, Steven had stumbled into Sanji after Usopp dropped a banana peel that he was keeping in his satchel right in front of the

chef. Sanji immediately dropped to the floor and Steven managed to trip on his aching form.

"I am going to KILL YOU, you shitty liar!" Sanji yelled as he got himself up. "That hurt!"

"It worked, didn't it?!" Usopp panted as he continued to run away from Steven.

"That HAS to be cheating!" Foxy cried, peering backwards at the sight of Steven handing Sanji a replica of his salmon colored shirt.

"The liar did not physically touch him, Mr. Foxy," Pearl countered. "He used his tools to his advantage!"

"Advantage, eh? Fuefehfehfeh!" Foxy laughed to himself. "I'll show them an advantage!"

"Bye, guys! Good luck!" Steven waved to his teammates as he returned to the sidelines, sitting next to a cheering Luffy and Damian.

Sanji, for his part, adjusted the shirt and started to run as fast as he could toward the "Non-Stevens" he desired the most. "Robin-chan! Sexy Foxy-girl! I'm going to grab you!"

"...typical," Pearl shook her head as she watched the shameless display.

The chef sprinted right toward Robin, but found himself face to face with the giant Hamburg. "Oy! Get out of my way, you shitty ape! There are beautiful ladies just waiting for me!"

"Whatever you say, chump!" Hamburg laughed as Pearl tossed him an oversized replica of Steven's shirt. "This game just became ours!"

As Hamburg began to do his duty as a "Steven," Sanji did the same and was getting very close to grabbing Porche. Just as he was about to tag her, a shout cried out from in front of him. **"More-More Slow-Slow Beam!"** At that moment, five beams of purple light struck Sanji in the chest, causing him to freeze in place.

"What just happened?!" Pearl asked, looking around the field until her eyes landed on Foxy, who was continuing to run away from Sanji. "What did you just do?!"

"Fuefehfehfeh! I merely used the power of the Slow-Slow Fruit to slow down the 'Steven' that was chasing me! One beam causes him to slow down just a little...but add five to the mix and you can consider yourself frozen!" Foxy grinned.

"That is completely against the rules!" Pearl shouted from the sidelines. "I will take a point away from Team F..."

"Ah, but is it really against the rules, my dear?" Foxy panted as he was now running away from Hamburg with Garnet right beside him. "The rules state that I cannot slow myself down or physically attack anyone...but the 'Slow-Slow Beam' is not a physical attack nor am I slowing myself down!"

"He's right, Pearl!" Garnet nodded and frowned. "There is nothing in the rules stating that you can't slow down the 'Steven!'"

Pearl, still not believing what she was hearing or seeing, looked back to the giant drawing Genevieve made that had the rules of Steven Tag mapped out on them. She examined it in-depth while continuing to make sure the players were still following the rules. Finally, her face turned a shade of light blue and her eyes raised up in concern. "Oh my stars...he's right. The move was completely legal."

"That it was...and I do believe you have a 'Pearl' to create in three...two...one..." Foxy taunted as Sanji tripped forward onto the ground, able to move freely once more.

"...this is not good..." Pearl bit her lip. "Team Straw Hat loses one point! Sanji, take off your shirt and put this on!"

Sanji eyed up Pearl and began to smile. "You want me to take off my shirt? Man; we should have played Steven Tag ages ago!"

"That isn't what I meant and you know it, you vulgar creature!" Pearl fought the urge to pummel Sanji right there, but decided against it

due to Steven's presence and the fact it would interfere with the validity of the game.

GWMAPT

On the sidelines, the morale of the Straw Hats had sunk considerably. The realization of just how much of an advantage Foxy had in this game had sunk in. "This is not good," Nami shook her head. "Foxy is a master manipulator. He knew that he could use his Devil Fruit powers to his advantage the entire time. That's why he didn't fight the idea of Steven Tag!"

"Damn it! We should have seen this coming!" Zoro took a shot of brandy in anger. "Why did we have to play a game of tag against a man who can slow anything down?"

"Don't look at me! Nobody told me that he had that Devil Fruit!" Steven defended himself.

"These are things that we really should have been told before the games started, Zoro!" Damian yelled. "That way we could have planned accordingly!"

"Well, sorry for not planning ahead!" Zoro shot back. "It's not my strong suit!"

"...we've noticed," Genevieve sighed. "Look, there's no point in arguing about it now. I wouldn't count our crew out just yet. We have two Gem fighters, a trickster sniper, and the former head of a criminal organization on our side...and Sanji..."

"YOU CAN DO IT, GUYS!" Luffy shouted loudly.

"...am I supposed to understand any of this?" Peridot asked, looking at the game with a bewildered expression on her face. "Why are some of them wearing Steven's appearance modifier and why is that one wearing one of the permafusion's paper things on his face?"

"They are playing a game, Peridot," Steven explained. "That's what the Davy Back Fight is: a series of games to show off a pirate crew's strength and skill! It's all about fun and having a good time!"

"...fun?" Running around like fools is considered 'fun?'" Peridot inquired warily.

"To be fair, calling it 'fun' is subjective," Genevieve conceded. "Nor would I actually say that this competition is about having fun."

"Then what is it about?" Steven cocked his head in confusion.

"Winning."

GWMAPT

Back on the field, Hamburg had managed to convert Porche into a "Steven," putting the score as two to zero in Team Foxy's favor. Sanji was still technically a "Pearl" and neither Porche nor Hamburg were willing to acknowledge his presence. As there was no wiggle room to use the rules to her advantage, Pearl began to worry about how the game would end up. However, she had faith that the combined efforts of the team would pull through.

Pearl observed as Hamburg was about to tag Capote, which would give a three to zero advantage to the Foxy Pirates, but then was shocked to see a most interesting sight. Coming from the side of the playing field, Amethyst's whip was willed into existence and latched onto the Fishman. With a mighty thrust, Capote was pulled away from Hamburg, causing him to collide into Garnet.

"Gah! What the hell was that?!" Hamburg asked himself as pulled himself together. "Where did Capote go?"

"Your freaky fish-guy got pulverized by the Purple Puma!" Amethyst called out and laughed. "Rules are rules, binky-boy! I can't push them into you, but I sure can take them away from you!"

"Good thinking, Amethyst," Garnet said as changed her appearance to sport one of Steven's shirts. "This ought to even things up."

GWMAPT

"So, now the perma...Garnet...is wearing a copy of your appearance modifier?" Peridot corrected herself.

"It's called a shirt, Peridot," Steven explained excitedly as he began to cheer. "Go, Garnet!"

"This is good. She can use her Future Vision to see where to go!" Damian nodded. "We have a chance after all!"

"...but she can't use her powers as a 'Steven!' Didn't you pay attention to the rules?" Petrea shook her head.

"This game has rules? I thought everybody was making it up as they were going along," Damian noted, earning a death glare from Nami and Petrea.

"For all we know, Garnet already used her Future Vision before getting tagged," Zoro pointed out. "Does Future Vision work like that? It's never really been made clear."

The Straw Hats looked to Steven, who started to tap his finger to the side of his cheek. "Hmm...well Future Vision is...what I mean is... oh, look! Garnet gave Sanji a high five! Now he can rejoin the game!"

GWMAPT

"This game is turning into quite the spectacle. Isn't it, Greg?"

"It sure is something, Ito...what that something is I have no idea, but it sure is something!"

"Come on, Mr. Universe! It's not that hard to follow!"

"Connie, you have to realize that when you get to be my age, everything starts getting harder to follow. Steven once tried to explain that Quidditch sport to me after you got him into those books...yeah, that wasn't happening."

"What the heck is Quidditch?"

"...not relevant to the game at hand. As both of the adults have failed to comment on the actual game occurring below us, I suppose that duty falls upon the twelve-year-old girl."

"Commentate away! You seem to have a better grasp on this than either of us!"

"So it seems. By this point in the game, Team Straw Hat is back on the board after Garnet managed to tag Usopp, though they are still trailing behind by the other two points Team Foxy already procured for themselves."

"Wait, I thought it was by one! Hamburg tagged the tall Gem-lady!"

"Just because Garnet was tagged doesn't mean that the Straw Hats take that point. Even though Garnet is technically a 'Steven' for the Straw Hats, the point still went to Hamburg for converting her."

"Gotcha! See, Greg? This isn't as hard as it sounded!"

"...yeah...oh! Look! Something is happening on the field! Garnet just tagged Sanji! That leaves only Robin and Amethyst on our side!"

"But we are still losing by one point. It is still anybody's game."

"True as that may be, at least I managed to understand something that was happening!"

"A true accomplishment indeed!"

GWMAPT

Foxy was starting to regret his decision to play his Devil Fruit powers card so soon in the game. He had naturally assumed that his powers would give him an immediate advantage in a game like tag, especially since standing still was considered a detrimental loss to both teams. He was literally tailor-made to win this game.

He failed to take into account how smart and conniving the Crystal Gem known as Amethyst was.

She was like him: able to take a situation and twist it in a manner that suited her advantageously. The Gem had picked up immediately that his hands were the source of his Slow-Slow Fruit powers and used her whip to tie them up and force them behind his

back. As she was not trying to push him into a "Steven," Pearl allowed it. He had to admit that such cunning was to be commended and admired.

Regardless of how the opposite team was progressing, the rest of Team Foxy knew to avoid tagging him until the bitter end after the rest of his team was "Stevenized" or "Stevenfied" or whatever the kid had called it. The second he could untie the whip, he would be able to regain control of the game and bring a decisive victory in this new Davy Back Fight game. Foxy had initially thought that Chopper was the best prize he could win from the Straw Hats, but the Gems had opened up a whole new world of possibilities for him.

He knew exactly who he would choose as his prize when he trounced the Straw Hats to oblivion.

Looking around the field, he started to notice that most of the participants were losing a bit of steam. While Hamburg was going strong, Porche started to slow down. He sympathized with her (as she was more of a lover than a fighter) but she would keep moving until her legs gave out. The Straw Hats were in the same boat for the long-nosed liar, but not the blond cook or the tall Gem. In fact, the Gem was moving rather swiftly...a bit too swiftly...

'What is with these damn Gems anyway?'

In a stroke of genius, Foxy realized a way around his major dilemma. 'Hold on...if my hands are tied behind me and I can't stop running...who is to say that I can't run backwards and aim at my opponents?'

Testing the waters, Foxy searched around and saw the Gem called Amethyst running away from Hamburg, who was gaining on her. It was a bold strategy: finish off the Straw Hats first while gaining their points. He was using his size to his advantage and it pleased the Silver Fox to no end. He turned around and attempted to run backwards directly away, yet parallel, from Amethyst. **"More-More Slow-Slow..."**

"Dos Fleur!" a voice called from the other side of the field.

"...BeaaAAAAAAAM!" Foxy cried as he stumbled around. He looked down to the ground and saw two hands waving at him. At once he knew what happened: the Straw Hat Nico Robin had attempted to trip him mid-beam. "Fuefehefeh! I still got the beam out! Hamburg still claimed another point for us!"

"Guess again," Robin called to him with a knowing smile just as she got tagged by Porche. "Oh no. It seems that I am caught."

"You know it, you fool! That's what happens when you try to mess with the captain!" Porche mocked her

"That is one point given to Team Foxy...and one point that will be taken away!" Pearl announced, throwing over a shirt to Robin.

"What?! Why are we having a point taken away?!" Foxy freaked out before he saw the exact reason WHY Robin had seemed so confident and unfazed.

Although Foxy had indeed managed to shoot out his "Slow-Slow Beam," Robin's interference caused him to completely miss the purple Gem. Instead, he hit poor Hamburg, which meant that he would be completely still for thirty seconds and would be forced to wear a ridiculous party favor on his face until a "Steven" (presumably Porche) would give him affection.

This meant that if Amethyst was caught by a Straw Hat without converting another player, they would be tied; meaning nobody would win the game. Porche was literally the only Foxy Pirate still playing the game. If she tagged Amethyst before the others could, victory would narrowly be claimed. There was no time to risk gaining additional advantages: Porche needed to end this now while they held the upper hand.

"PORCHE! FOR ALL THAT IS SACRED AND HOLY: GET THAT GEM!" Foxy shouted as he struggled once more to free up his hands.

It was too dangerous to attempt the "Slow-Slow Beam" again...then again, was it really? What did he have to lose in this case? As the "Stevens" were unable to use their abilities against him, he had a

better chance of gaining a clear shot at his opponents. If he struck one of the Straw Hats, they would become a "Pearl" and would lose a point for their team. If he struck one of his men, there would be a chance that a Straw Hat would accidentally bump into them, giving them a point but adding another chance for Team Foxy to claim victory by doubling the amount of "Stevens" able to catch Amethyst. The only two people that would hinder his ability for victory was Amethyst (which would make her a sitting duck for the Straw Hats to claim) and Porche (which would dash any and all chances Foxy had for winning).

There was no choice in the matter: Foxy had to risk everything in order to gain the upper hand against the damn Straw Hats.

"MORE-MORE! MORE-MORE! MORE-MORE!" Foxy continually shouted, shooting his pink blasts behind him. He prayed to himself that the beams would strike true and hit at least one of the Straw Hats.

Of course, luck was seemingly not on Foxy's side. Each strike hit Capote, Hamburg, and Gina...meaning that the Straw Hats could either chase to grab them right then and there or would have no problem rushing after Amethyst with only Porche in the way. It was then that Foxy realized he was going to lose the game with a tie.

"Oh crap."

GWMAPT

"Well, it has come down to this friends. It seems like the Foxy Pirates have lost the game. The Straw Hats are almost entirely comprised of 'Stevens' and the only two players not affected by the 'Slow-Slow Beam' are Porche and my beloved captain...who is still bound by Amethyst's whip!"

"That's great...well, for us that is. I'm sorry, Ito."

"Don't be, Greg. I have no doubt that Straw Hat Luffy will request to return the adorable Tony Tony Chopper to his crew, which will no doubt destroy our fair Porche. Oh well, we will have two more chances to win him back for her!"

"Very true...but doubtful if I know Luffy. Say, Connie...why aren't you talking? You've been quiet for the past five minutes! I figured you'd be happy that we got this game in the bag!"

"Mr. Universe, I wouldn't be too sure...look at the field. Garnet and Sanji are the furthest away from Amethyst, Usopp is the closest but he looks like he is about to collapse from exhaustion, and Robin is neck and neck with Porche to overtake him. This could be anybody's game. Everybody is ignoring the rest of Foxy's men. This could prove to be the Straw Hats' undoing!"

"...you don't mean that Foxy has a chance to win?"

"I mean it is very likely."

GWMAPT

Robin and Porche were literally side by side with each other as they overtook Usopp, who was knocked away by Porche to the ground. It was down to these two ladies as they ran with all of their might. They were mere seconds from tagging Amethyst, who was actually doing what she could to keep herself away from them.

"This game is in the bag, Straw Hat!" Porche yelled spitefully. "You don't have a chance!"

"What a very un-Steven thing to say," Robin observed as she hustled toward the Gem.

"Keep laughing! You'll see what happens when Foxy forces you to be a part of our crew!"

"Oh, I'm the desired target of Foxy's desires?" Robin gave a light chuckle. "I'm flattered."

"Can one of you just catch me already?!" Amethyst complained from in front of them. "This is starting to get annoying!"

"Don't mind if I do!" Porche leaped to grab her. Unfortunately for the pirate, she missed and ended up colliding with the ground.
"NOOOO!"

"I think that's my cue," Robin pushed herself even harder, finally tagging the Gem and causing her to stop running. The second Robin touched her body; Amethyst converted her dress into a replica of Steven's shirt.

"Woot! You go, girl! Take that, Foxy-lady!" Amethyst gave the archaeologist a high five. "Pearl, did we win?!"

"Hold on one moment," Pearl frowned, rewatching the play from her gemstone. She was slowly counting to herself as she examined the holographic projection. After a moment, her expression turned grim and pale. "Team Straw Hat gets one point for converting Amethyst and ends the game...loses a point for one of its 'Stevens' staying still for longer than thirty seconds!"

"WHAT?!" the Straw Hats yelled at once.

"Who was still?!" Sanji demanded. "We've been running around like idiots the entire time!"

Pearl merely pointed to Usopp, who had finally gotten up off of the ground and was sweating like a dog. "He was knocked to the ground right before Amethyst was tagged...exactly thirty five seconds before she was tagged."

"But I thought there were rules against hitting another player..." Robin pointed out.

"Only 'Non-Stevens' into 'Stevens,'" Pearl shook her head. "What the Foxy Pirate did was legal...had he gotten up in time, we would have won. But he remained on the ground for thirty five seconds..."

"YOU SHITTY LIAR!" Sanji started to strangle Usopp.

"Stop it! You'll kill him!" Pearl tried to get in-between the two of them.

"THAT'S THE POINT!"

"Fuefehfehfeh!" Foxy roared victoriously as the remainder of the Foxy Pirates cheered from the stands. Porche, for her part, was getting praise from all of her teammates as they all cheered her on. There was a sense of joy and jubilation coming from the energetic

crew which contrasted by the sheer shock and horror of the Straw Hat Crew.

"We lost Steven Tag?" Steven whispered.

"Split-head won?!" Luffy was shocked. "No way!"

"I feel like there should have been a rule against that...it doesn't seem right that the kid lost at his own game," Damian bit his lip. "Damn it."

"So what? Your source for entertainment has concluded. Don't we have two more to go?" Peridot scoffed.

"You don't understand. Now Foxy has to pick one of us to join his crew," Petrea tried to explain. "You could end up being stuck here sailing the seas with him for the rest of his life!"

"Why would I do something stupid like that?" Peridot asked.

"Because you swore loyalty to the Straw Hats and are playing the game!" the chocolatier yelled. "You're trying to make up for everything you did before, right?"

"No! I was trying to save the Earth from the Cluster! I was forced..."

"Who cares if you were forced here?! You're practically a Crystal Gem now! That means you are doing this for him...for them!" Petrea pointed to Steven and then the others. "This might not be your dimension and there might not be a Cluster, but damn it; this planet matters just as much!"

"What are you trying to imply?"

"I'm implying that if you want everyone here to like you and forgive you, be a better Gem and start doing some good!" Petrea shook her head. "You can start by being a team player!"

"You want me...to be one of these 'team...players?'" Peridot asked slowly. Then she looked to Steven and the others, realizing how worried each of them looked. She frowned and considered the situation and sighed. "Very well. I shall be a...'team player.'"

"Good," Petrea patted her shoulder. "You'll be accepted in no time. Trust me...I know..."

Before Peridot could inquire more about what she was implying, the sound of the commentators filled the air.

"I can easily say I have never seen a victory come so close before! The Straw Hats put up a valiant effort, but our captain pulled through in the end! Tough break, Greg and Connie. What are your thoughts on this outcome?" Itomimizu asked from the sky.

"It ended like it began: confusing beyond all belief," Greg conceded.

"Both teams did as best as they could...it really came down to Porche's aggressive negotiations with Usopp," Connie's voice rang out. "Now here comes the real question: which member of the crew will Foxy take?"

"That is a good question! Let us listen in below. It seems like Captain Foxy has made his decision!"

All eyes were now on Foxy, who was still gloating at his team's close victory. He coughed as he allowed the tension to build. "Straw Hats, you tried...but it wasn't enough to beat back the incredible might of the Foxy Pirates! I have given this decision much thought...but in the end, there is only one person I want for my crew!"

Robin bit her lip as she expected to be called forward. It made sense. Her Devil Fruit powers were the perfect asset for a crew like Foxy's. Porche's comments suggested as much and she had been preparing for such an outcome just in case. Finally, Foxy made the announcement that changed the game forever:

"THE PIRATE I CLAIM FOR MY OWN IS YOU: STEVEN UNIVERSE!"

The Second Round

The Straw Hats and Crystal Gems looked to Foxy and to Steven in shock. The choice to claim Steven as a member of the Foxy Pirates was a great surprise to all of them, especially as they were still reeling from their last second loss in Steven Tag. It seemingly never occurred to them that Foxy would see Steven as a viable option in the game.

"You want...me?" Steven asked, just as confused as his peers.

"That makes no strategic sense!" Pearl argued. "Steven is just a boy! He doesn't have the fighting prowess of a warrior like Zoro or the power of any of us Gems! What possible value does Steven offer your team?!"

"...that's laying it on a bit too thick, Pearl," Amethyst pointed out. "Steven isn't that bad to have on your team! He's saved us dozens of times!"

"Quiet, Amethyst!" Pearl whispered. "I don't mean it! I'm trying to get him to reconsider!"

"Don't hurt Steven's feelings while you are doing it!"

"I most certainly am NOT hurting his feelings!" Pearl retorted. "How dare you even suggest that!"

"Hush up, you two!" Foxy yelled at them. "I chose Steven because he is the only one of you Straw Hats who seems to have any manners at all! I chose him because he was nice to me!"

"That is a terrible reason to pick someone for their crew!" Petrea shook her head.

"Terrible or not, those are the rules," Garnet frowned and clenched her fist. "Steven! You heard the man. You have to go with them."

"What?" Steven asked, shocked at Garnet's dismissal of him.

"How can you be so cold?!" the Straw Hats yelled at once.

"I...I just don't want to accept it. We gambled against fate and lost...the sooner we get this over with, the sooner you will be back with us," Garnet grimaced. "Hurry up and get over there, young man!"

"Yes, Garnet," Steven said weakly, walking over to Foxy with his head high though teary-eyed all the same.

"Steven!" Pearl extended her hand out to him but was blocked by Zoro.

"Garnet is blunt, but right. This is the risk we took bringing you guys here. Just accept it and move on," the swordsman explained much to Pearl's repulsion.

"Move on?! How can you expect us to move on?! What would you have us do?!"

"Win," Zoro simply stated. "We need to win the next two rounds to bring Chopper and Steven back to our side."

"But if we couldn't even win Steven Tag, what hope do we have against them?!" Pearl continued to panic.

"Simple: you guys were missing one critically important detail in Steven Tag...something that cost you dearly," Damian chimed in.

"What?" Luffy asked eagerly.

"Me," Damian chuckled. "Sit back and relax, folks. Zoro, Peridot, and I have this covered next round. Am I wrong, Zoro?"

"Not in the slightest," Zoro cracked his neck. "Yo, split-head! Let me finish my drink and then I'll wipe the floor with your men. Sound good?"

"See. Right there. That is why I chose Steven here and not you," Foxy groaned. "Porche, give our newest member one of our masks!"

"Yes, captain! Come on, cutie!" The blue-haired woman motioned

for Steven to join her, which caused the Gems to appear even more hostile than before.

"Steady, Gems," Garnet forced herself to say despite not wanting to herself.

"I don't understand this! Why is Steven willingly surrendering himself to the enemy?!" Peridot asked as she watched Steven getting taken away from his family. The Gem seemed just as agitated as her captors, though she tried to hide it from them. "He is a Quartz Gem! He should be above such petty restraints!"

"Gem ranking means nothing in this world or on Earth," Garnet told her. "You need to play by their rules if you want to see Steven back with us. I know you want him back."

"Of course I want Steven back! What kind of a question is that?!" Peridot shook her head and adopted a determined look. "You...the green-haired one and the explosive buffoon. If we are participating in this 'game,' tell me my required roll and function so we may return Steven back to the fold!"

"Woah! Why are we just automatically assuming that we are taking Steven back first?" Nami pointed out. "We also have to think about Chopper!"

"Shit. That's right," Sanji frowned. "This is a dilemma."

"Why don't we talk about our winnings when we actually win?" Genevieve asked. "Getting cocky is what got us in this mess in the first place."

"The small painter-girl speaks the truth. Fox-man!" Garnet called to Foxy. "Explain the terms for the next game!"

"Gladly! The next game is a favorite of mine...THE GROGGY RING!" Foxy announced.

GWMAPT

"The Groggy Ring: a favorite of these games and an easy way for our captain to rack up new members of the crew!" Itomimizu

cheerfully exclaimed from the sky. "I would get a comment from by co-commentators, but it seems Greg has suffered a panic attack and Connie is trying to calm him down!"

"Just breathe, Mr. Universe!" Connie was saying. "Steven will be won back in no time! If I'm confident about this, then you need to be too!"

"What if he doesn't?! I'm going to be forced to stay here and join this pirate crew if I'm going to want to see my little boy grow up to adulthood!" Greg hyperventilated. "This is too much to take in! What about my shop? What about the Gems? What about...?!"

"Mr. Universe, if you do not calm down you might suffer a heart attack! I really don't want to use that defibrillator so soon!" Connie tried reaching through to him.

"Since my companions seem to be a bit preoccupied, allow me to explain the rules of the Groggy Ring to you! In the court that you see before you, there is a goal positioned on each side. In order to win the game, you need to throw your opponent's ball into the enemy's goal," Itomimizu explained to the crowd below.

"That doesn't sound so bad," Pearl sighed in relief. "Maybe this won't be so hard after..."

"However, you won't be using a regular ball for this game...you'll be using a person! Each team must choose one of their teammates to be the ball. Now, these teams were chosen earlier and cannot be changed at all during the competition. For the Straw Hats, we have Damian: the living bomb, Roronoa Zoro: the swordsman with an immense bounty, and Peridot: the Gem...thing!"

Stepping on the field like champions, Damian and Zoro walked to the center just like one would expect them to: making themselves look cool to the crowd and looking utterly indifferent at the situation respectively. Peridot, meanwhile, trailed behind them utterly embarrassed and confused about what was going on around her.

"This is going to be easy, Zoro!" Damian laughed.

"It won't even be worth my time," Zoro shrugged. "I could take everyone on myself and not break a sweat."

"I'll take that bet! First one to sweat buys a bottle of rum?" Damian asked excitedly.

"You're on!"

"God, I've missed this!"

"I'm confused. Why are you concerning yourself with such trivialities like human perspiration?" Peridot asked. "Is this how this 'Groggy Ring' is supposed to work?"

"Um...hey...look!" one of Foxy's men yelled to the laughing pirates. "One of you needs to be the ball here! Who is going to be?"

Without missing a beat, the two pointed at Peridot. "Her!"

"Here you go!" the Foxy pirate said as he tied a ball on top of Peridot's triangle-shaped head.

"...wow, thanks..." Peridot responded warily. "Wait; why was I not consulted about this arrangement?!"

"Because you tried to kill us the last time we met!" Zoro explained.

"Because I'm not ruining this hair!" Damian added.

Peridot opened her mouth to protest before closing it. "...fair enough. I shall play the part of the 'ball' if it serves as an adequate form of penance as well as a way to return Steven to us."

At that moment, music filled the air. Unlike the last time music played, there was not a sense of confusion emulating from the Foxy Pirates. Rather, this seemed to excite them and pump them up. Glancing to the sky, the Straw Hats could still see that Greg was too preoccupied with coming to terms that his son was now a Foxy Pirate to create this music.

"Hey, what's going on?" the newly masked Steven asked his captain. "What's that cool music for?"

"The pride of the Foxy Pirates, my dear boy," Foxy grinned. "Just wait and see!"

"Cool!" Steven smiled as he sat next to Chopper. The small reindeer looked at the half-Gem and immediately gave him a giant hug.

"Steven, I didn't want this to happen, especially not to you! You don't deserve this on your birthday!"

"It's okay, Chopper. Everything will be fine," Steven continued to smile.

"How can you say that and act so calm?!"

"Because I have faith in the Gems and in the Straw Hats! We always come out on top!" Steven explained. "Besides, if I am stuck being a part of another pirate crew, at least I've got you by my side!"

"Stop it, you asshole!" Chopper blushed as he tried not to cry. This was still a very emotional time for the reindeer, but he did his best not to show it. Unfortunately, that failed the second the reason why music was playing was made apparent.

"To our challenging opponents, what you hear now is the theme song to our reigning Groggy Ring champions! Naturally, they are undefeated on this game! Please direct your attention to our ship: the Sexy Foxy!" Itomimizu announced high in the sky to the crowd.

"...'undefeated?!'" Nami and Usopp gulped.

"Is that really their ship's name?" Pearl made a face in disgust. "Revoluting!"

The giant fox figurehead lowered its jaw onto the ground, revealing three giant foes. Leading the pack was the returning giant Hamburg, but the two beings that were behind him made him seem as small as Peridot. All of the Straw Hats looked upon them in sheer terror while the Crystal Gems were unfazed by their appearance.

"Oh no. They are tall. The horror," Garnet said dryly.

"You aren't intimidated at all by my Groggy Monsters?" Foxy called

to her, clearly a bit disappointed.

"When you fight Corrupted Gems every day for thousands of years, you learn that size doesn't mean anything," Garnet shrugged. "We could take them just the same."

"Your little friend seems to think differently," Foxy sneered, pointing to Peridot in the ring. She was cowering behind Zoro and Damian, clearly frightened by the three towering titans.

"Stop whimpering! You are making us look bad!" Damian was whispering to her while trying to keep a straight face himself. Zoro, for his part, looked unimpressed as well.

"Feast your eyes on the 'Four Footed Dash Freak' Hamburg, Pickles the 'Tackle Demon,' and the half-giant/ half-Fishman known as Big Pan!" Itomimizu introduced each member of the Groggy Monsters, starting with the smallest to the biggest. Of them all, Big Pan was the most intimidating due to his enormous size. However, the others were nothing to discount either.

"Gah! They chose the giant Fishman to be their ball!" Usopp pointed to the giant creature, who was wearing the same small ball on his head that Peridot was wearing. "That's horrifying! How are they going to get him to topple into the ring?!"

"That's hilarious! Moss-head is gonna get flattened trying to move that guy!" Sanji laughed.

"You've got this, Damian!" Petrea yelled into the ring. "Just remember: you're bigger than they ever will be!"

"Wait, wasn't the smallest one just in the other game? How is he allowed to play?" Nami asked.

"You can have a player participate in more than one game, but you run the risk of your original choice being taken by the opposing team. A smart captain will target those players to weaken the other team," Foxy explained.

"...smart strategy..."

"Now that our two teams are on the field, know this: all it takes is one point to win the game. If you can get the opponent's ball into the opposite goal, you will win. This means that the Straw Hats need to target Big Pan and the Groggy Monsters need to target Peridot. How will this game go? Who will score the first goal? Let the game begin!" Itomimizu yelled with all of his might, much to the delight of the Foxy Pirates.

A referee walked to the center of the field and talked to Hamburg.
"Do you want to play or pass?"

"We will play," Hamburg said with a malicious grin on his face.

"Then the game continues until my whistle blows! In addition, you need to remove your swords! No weapons allowed!" the referee said after signaling them to begin.

"A swordsman without his swords...I can handle that," Zoro grumbled to himself as he relinquished his blades.

"GAH," Peridot screamed as she witnessed Hamburg and Pickles starting to chase after her. "THIS IS COMPLETELY UNFAIR!"

With that, the Gem sprinted away along the field, doing her best to evade the two larger players who continued to laugh at her misfortune. Finally, Pickles went to lunge at her. As he moved to grab her, Damian picked his nose and shot it directly at the larger humanoid's mouth.

"Nose Fancy Cannon!"

The humanoid managed to swallow the booger, unaware of what was happening. He stopped and gagged for a moment before directing himself toward Damian instead. "That was disgusting! Just for that, I'll flatten you like a pancake!"

"Didn't you know that you should watch what you eat?" Damian smirked before giving him a wink. The second he did so, Pickles' insides exploded. The large being started coughing up smoke and gasping for air before collapsing to the ground in agony.

"What?!" Foxy stood up and looked shocked. "What the hell just

happened?!"

GWMAPT

"In an unexpected turn of events, the Straw Hats' bomb-man turned his boogers into a bomb! Who could have seen that coming?!" Itomimizu asked his audience.

"That was an amazing tactic...if not unsanitary," Connie admitted. The young girl had returned to commentating while allowing Greg to catch his breath and breathe. "They aren't allowed to use weapons, but technically the referee can't fault him for using his natural talents!"

"Hear that boss? Next time we need to add 'No Devil Fruits' to the rules!" Itomimizu laughed. "Anything to add to the excitement Greg?"

"...this world isn't so bad. I could make a living here pirating. Yeah! But what if I'm caught and sent to prison? A guy like me can't go to prison! Maybe I can be a 'pirate by association,' like Ruth in *Pirates of Penzance*! Yeah! That could work..."

"...I don't think Mr. Universe is ready to commentate yet," Connie sighed. "Oh look! Zoro has attempted to climb and attack the big one...Big Pan, is it?"

"That's right, but he will have a hard time doing that! He's got the skin off a mudfish! He'll just slip right off of him!"

GWMAPT

"I have a plan!" Peridot called to her teammates. Zoro was trying and failing to climb Big Pan while Damian was avoiding Hamburg's assaults. It was clear that both teams wanted to eliminate the other team's players so they could leave only Big Pan of Peridot standing.

"Shout it out to everybody, why don't you?" Damian yelled back.

"You clod, you are the linchpin to victory in this asinine recreational activity! Ignore me if you want, but I am in this for Steven and I will not see him disappointed on his date of 'birth!'" Peridot retorted back with all of her might.

Biting his lip, Damian looked out into the crowd and focused on Steven. The man proceeded to punch Hamburg in the face, allowing the connecting fist to explode in his face like a bomb right into the referee. **"Bomb Punch Man!"**

While the referee struggled to get out under the smoking form of Hamburg, Damian ran to Peridot. "Alright. What is so important that you want to shout it across the field?!"

"Here's the plan: this 'Big Pan' is rather intimidating and formidable, but he seems to be a bit slow on the uptake. Your bombs might make for a good show, but you've played your hand already! He is expecting that despite his obvious lower intelligence," Peridot elaborated. "My theory is that if the green-haired one were to throw me directly at him, the sight would either distract him for you to knock him out and presumably into the ring or cause him to grab my adorable yet minuscule body and slam me into our goal, ruining any chance we have to reclaim Steven and the animal!"

Damian blinked and nodded. "So you want a distraction fast ball special?"

"Yes. That is exactly what I want...I think," Peridot nodded. "Are we in agreement?"

"I think that could work," he smirked. "Good thinking, Peri."

The Gem began to blush and kicked the ground. Just as she was about to comment, her eyes widened and she pushed Damian out of the way. "INCOMING!"

Sure enough, Big Pan was now chasing after Zoro. However, something was made very clear: he had knives hidden under his boots and was trying to stomp Zoro as opposed to catch him. The sight caused Damian's mouth to open in shock. "WHAT THE HELL?! I THOUGHT WEAPONS WEREN'T ALLOWED!"

The referee, who was struggling to get Hamburg off of him, finally got free and started to whistle innocently. "I didn't see anything...except your deliberate attack on me! Damian of the Straw Hats gets a yellow card!"

"WHAT?!" Damian roared in anger. "WHAT THE HELL DOES THAT MEAN?!"

GWMAPT

"This is terrible! The referee has given Damian a yellow card! One more call like that and he will be given a red card!" Itomimizu explained.

"That's not fair! That means he will be kicked out of the game!" Connie responded in shock. "How can there be such blatant cheating on the field?!"

"How could he just up and attack the poor, innocent referee?" Itomimizu countered.

"...I don't think he is considered innocent if he is ignoring such obvious evidence right in front of him."

GWMAPT

"Fuehfehfeh!" Foxy was laughing on the sidelines. "This is going better than I expected!"

"That's cheating!" Steven pointed out. "The big guy clearly has blade boots!"

"One thing you will learn on this ship is that the referee can't 'see everything,' Steven," Foxy explained.

"Hmm..." Steven sat in thought for a moment before widening his eyes. "Say, Captain Foxy?"

"Yes, my boy?"

"I really want to learn more about the ship," Steven said slyly. "Can...can you show me?"

"Our ship, eh?" Foxy looked to the ring and saw that Big Pan was now chasing Zoro with a giant axe...all unseen by the referee. "Well...I don't see a need to interfere here, so why not? Come along, Steven. You too, Chopper! It will be good for you to learn too!"

"Um, boss," Porche started. "Don't you want to see the end of the fight?"

"Eh, I'm sure they have it in the bag," Foxy waved it off. "They've gone undefeated in every single game we have ever played. Why should today be different?"

As Foxy led the two former Straw Hats away, Steven gave his old crew a covert thumbs up. Garnet and Nami, seeing the symbol, nodded to show they understood what Steven was doing: getting Foxy out of the way so he could not make the fight go in his favor by cheating. Of course, most of the others were still engrossed with the game to notice and Pearl was too busy freaking out at the referee to do the same.

"See! He is carrying an axe! That has to be considered against the rules!" Pearl argued.

"I...I don't see anything wrong at all!" the referee kept his cool.

"But if you would just turn around and..."

"The sun is too bright that way. I can see just fine here!"

"Oh, you are just so rude!" Pearl fumed. "How can you call yourself an objective referee?!"

GWMAPT

With two of the Groggy Monsters down, Big Pan was by himself on the field. He was taking advantage of the lack of an objective referee by trying to kill the swordsman with any weapon he could find. Though it might just be easier to squish him, Big Pan was told to always put on a show when performing out in the ring. It was the only way to go about doing things.

It was then that he noticed an interesting sight: the little green girl was now running beside the swordsman. It seemed like they were talking about something, but Big Pan couldn't figure out what. Regardless, this might be the best time to take care of one of the Straw Hats and to kill their ball at the same time. If the green girl died, it would mean instant disqualification for the Straw Hats. Foxy

would no doubt be proud of him and would shower him with praise.

Big Pan liked praise.

It surprised Big Pan to see that the swordsman had grabbed the little green girl and had, amazingly, thrown her at him. Did he not realize that this was a death sentence for her? He was literally tossing the poor creature into Big Pan's mouth. Though he was certainly no cannibal, he had no objections to breaking every bone in her body with his tremendous jaws.

"GAH! DON'T BREAK ME!" the little green girl wailed as she flew in the air.

'This is almost too eas...' Big Pan thought to himself before he felt blinding, searing pain all over his face.

Trying to work together what had just happened, the explosions and flashes of light continued to pelt his face, nose, and eyes. The giant Fishman couldn't even see the small green girl anymore. The pain was starting to get to be too much for him and he tried to keep it together as best as he could.

Suddenly, he felt someone grab his legs, which caught him off-guard. The little pests were trying to take advantage of his situation and were attempting something. He went to swing the axe again, but felt the pain once more on his face. Instinctively, he diverted his swinging hand to his face to try to soothe the pain, neglecting to realize that he was about to knock himself out with his axe.

At that moment, Big Pan's world went dark.

GWMAPT

"They did it!" Connie cheered. "The Straw Hats managed to topple Big Pan into the ring!"

"I still can't believe it! They used Peridot as a distraction while Damian used his bomb-boogers to pelt our beloved Big Pan in the face! While he was blinded, Zoro attempted to use his strength to topple the giant, which only caused him to swing his axe, sealing his own fate after getting distracted again by the devious Damian! What

a show!" Itomimizu shouted in amazement. "What a great time to be witnessing a Davy Back Fight folks! Greg, did you see that spectacle of a showing?"

"...okay...I can do this. I can commentate and be a respectable father. I can do right by my son and...I'm sorry, Ito. What was that?" Greg finally managed to get it together, taking large breaths to keep himself calm.

"The Straw Hats did it! They won their first round in the game! Once the referee notices this sight and blows his whistle, the Straw Hats can claim any member of the Foxy Pirates for their own," Itomimizu caught him up to speed.

"THAT MEANS STEVEN! OH FRABJOUS DAY! CALLOOH! CALLAY!" Greg cheered, almost knocking himself off of the bird and onto the ground below.

"While your son is included in this, Straw Hat Luffy may take any member of our crew or even our flag. That's up to him and him alone...and it will require the presence of our captain on the field."

GWMAPT

On the ground below, the referee was doing everything in his power not to look behind him to acknowledge the victory of the Straw Hat pirates. This was bad and unexpected. He looked around for Foxy, but could find him nowhere in view. It was then that he remembered that he walked onto the Sexy Foxy with the two newest members of the Foxy Pirates. It was possible that he could hold out for his boss to hear the commotion, come out, and freeze the other players to give Hamburg and Pickles enough time to recover, but it was a risky gamble.

"Hey," a soft voice said beside him. He turned and noticed the young girl with rosy cheeks standing right next to him. "Crazy game, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you are talking about..." the referee shifted his eyes away from the girl and looked out into the distance.

"I have to say, I'm amazed that your captain missed all of this. It's a good thing you didn't blow your whistle to get his attention or else we would have lost for sure," she sighed. "Us Straw Hats were really lucky, weren't we?"

"Oh yeah?! I'll show you luck!" the referee smiled wickedly as he blew his whistle as loud as he could. He hoped Foxy could hear him from inside of the ship, but he was confident about his ability to project his whistle.

"Amazing! That was the concluding whistle! The Straw Hats have officially won the Groggy Ring!" the voice of Itomimizu echoed throughout the island, causing an upset with the crowd. The referee blinked his eyes and realized exactly what he did.

"I'll say this: you really showed me luck," the girl shrugged and walked back. "Good to know that you are the guy to talk to about that."

GWMAPT

Foxy was furious.

He could not believe that he was so preoccupied with showing Steven Universe and Tony Tony Chopper the glory that was the Sexy Foxy that he missed his first ever loss in a Davy Back Fight. There had been close calls before, true, but he had never been so insulted in all of his life. These Straw Hats had bested his finest men...and now he would pay the price.

"Who is it going to be, Straw Hat?" he asked bitterly. "Which member of my crew are you going to claim for your own? Get it over with fast, you asshole, because I'll just reverse the call in the final round!"

"You don't have to be such a sore loser about it, bro!" Amethyst called to him. "These guys won fair and square!"

"Shut up! My perfect winning streak just got broken by a poorly dressed clown, a drunk swordsman without his swords, and whatever the hell that thing is! I am allowed to vent my anger about

the situation!" Foxy roared angrily.

"You hear that, Petrea? I broke his streak without breaking a sweat!" Damian laughed to his companions. "How about that?"

"You did well, Damian. I'll make you some of those mint brownies you like to celebrate later," the chocolatier smiled, giving him a well-deserved hug.

"YOU DID GREAT, DAMIAN! YOU BLEW THEM ALL AWAY!" Luffy cheered excitedly.

"Both literally and as a pun! What about you, Zoro? Where's my drink?" Damian pointed at the obvious sweat marks all over Zoro's shirt.

"YOU TRY GETTING CHASED BY A GIANT FISHMAN FOR THAT LONG WITHOUT SWEATING!" Zoro barked and shook his head. "YOU DON'T DESERVE SHIT! YOU DIDN'T EVEN LET ME KNOCK ANY OF THEM OUT!"

"First off, I gave you plenty of time to take out the big guy and you would have gotten him down if not for his axe. Secondly, I used BOTH of you as a distraction! Look at Peridot! You don't hear her complaining!"

It was true. Peridot was doing the exact opposite: exalting her praises upon anyone who would hear it.

"That Groggy Monster was no match to the superior intellect and dexterity of a being like me! Shower me with praise! I deserve it for my victory, do I not?!" Peridot shouted merrily. "Anyone? Why aren't I getting any attention?!"

"You did well, Peridot. That's all the praise you need," Garnet patted her back. "Keep it up."

Peridot opened her mouth to complain before stopping. "Yes...I suppose modesty is in order...for now. There will be plenty of time to bask in my glory later on..."

"HEY! CAN WE PLEASE FOCUS ON THE MATTER AT HAND?!"

Foxy screamed like a child. "CHOOSE A MEMBER OF MY CREW SO WE CAN MOVE ON AND FINISH THIS!"

"Oh! Right!" Luffy said, whipping his attention back to the members of the Foxy Pirates. As he did so, Peridot felt a small tap on her shoulder. It was Robin, who was giving her a small smile.

"Nice thinking putting yourself out there as a distraction. That was impressive," she said. "I think that will go a long way with the others."

"You...you think so?" Peridot asked while blushing. "They didn't seem like they cared at all. They were too busy heaping praise on the others even though it was my plan!"

"I can assure you that your actions did not go unnoticed, Miss Peridot. Give it time and don't force it...they will come around to you. They already are."

"I...thank you, Robin. I needed that," the Gem admitted.

"I gathered. Now, let's see who our captain will select back into the fold: Steven or Mr. Doctor," Robin motioned for Peridot to follow her.

"What kind of a question is that? Steven is the logical choice! He is..."

"The first thing you need to know about the Straw Hats is to throw logic out of the window."

"...oh...that is more logical than it has any right being."

The two rejoined the full group as Luffy looked from Steven to Chopper. It was clear that the choice was hard for the captain. He knew that it could be perceived that he was favoring one member of his crew over the other, which was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Well Straw Hat? Who is it going to be?" Foxy sneered.

"I choose...I choose..." Luffy stammered, unable to give a straight answer. Thankfully, he was about to receive outside help.

"Hey! Luffy!" Steven called to him. "Pick Chopper!"

"What?" the Gems, Luffy, and Chopper said at the same time.

"Not my Choppy!" Porche bemoaned.

"Why would you have Luffy choose the doctor over you, Steven?!" Pearl asked, clearly incredibly shocked. "Don't you want to come back with us?!"

"Of course I do, but Chopper has been here longer and I came here to save him! It is the right thing to do!" Steven announced proudly.

"But Steven..." Chopper whispered as tears started to flow.

"I told you already that I trust you guys to win the next round! Now go on, you lovable reindeer!" Steven held up his hand for a high five. "Give me some hoof!"

The reindeer ripped off his mask and did as Steven asked. Luffy, for his part, happily announced Chopper as his choice, making the decision final. As Chopper returned to his pirate crew, Foxy made his way to Luffy while cracking his knuckles.

"You've gotten off easy so far, Straw Hat. You bested my men, true, but now you will know me. It is time for you and me to go one on one in a trial by combat! I..."

"Wait!" Steven called. "That's not fair!"

"What isn't fair?!" Foxy growled. "I still have the ability to choose my game and I already chose Combat to be our final match!"

"But that's not fair to Petrea or Pearl or the others who haven't participated!" Steven argued. "They deserve to have a chance in the ring!"

"Steven, you don't need to do this. If the odd man wanted us to be a part of the crew, he would just pick us," Pearl said warily.

"But how would he know that you would be worthy members of the crew?! He hasn't seen what you guys can do!" Steven reminded

them.

"What do you mean?" Foxy asked.

"Well, Pearl can summon...nah. It's not worth it. You know who you want to pick when you win...you don't need to see them in action," Steven sighed theatrically. "Combat it is..."

"No! No, you are right! If I am going to make an educated decision about who would be the best possible addition to my crew, I should see the benefits of all possibilities! Straw Hat, our trial by combat is postponed, but don't think you are out of this yet! Since I already saw how the other members of your crew functioned in the last game's Donut Race, I challenge you, this 'Petrea,' and the other Gem to face three members of my crew to a new game of my choosing! Do you agree with this change?" Foxy declared.

"Okay!" Luffy raised his hand in a fist despite not knowing what was going on. "I'll kick your ass in whatever game you want!"

"Oh, it's not my 'ass' you will kick," Foxy smiled. "By agreeing to this, I am now allowed to pick any member of my current crew to challenge you. You will face three of my newest members of my crew: Kibageru, the former member of the Fanged Toad Pirates and my last opponent in the Davy Back Fight!"

At Foxy's request, a portly gentleman with an impressive mustache walked up and joined him. He was wearing a pirate hat with the logo crossed off with white tape. He folded his arms and sneered at the Straw Hats, though they did not look intimidated.

"Phil, the former high ranking member of some stupid organization whose name slips my mind," Foxy announced. He waited a few moments before coughing again. "Phil, for all that is sacred and holy, get your ass out here!"

Five minutes later, the man with the staff from before made himself known. He yawned and flipped Foxy off, causing him to get even angrier. "You lousy ingrate! After I helped hide you from the Marines, this is the thanks I get?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" he shrugged. "Cut me some slack. That was some good mutton you were dragging me away from."

"...why can't you respect me like the rest of the crew? Seriously, why?" Foxy shook his head in irritation. "Finally, my last choice for my crew is our newest member: Steven Universe!"

All eyes turned on Steven as he stood beside his crew. He folded his arms and gave a look of sympathy to Pearl and the others, who were seconds away from freaking out about the situation.

"You can't be serious?!" Pearl finally snapped. "We have to face Steven?!"

"That has to be against the rules!" Usopp cried.

"By agreeing to change the final game, any members of our respective crews are fair game to send out. Steven is a member of my crew, is he not? Tell me I'm wrong, Gem. Go ahead."

"No...no he's right," Pearl finally whispered. "This is completely legal. The only way to change teams is for both captains to agree on a completely separate game, which is a little used rule apparently... hidden away on a margin on page forty-seven of the rule book. What's worse is that if Steven is suspected of throwing the game to make us win, we automatically forfeit and lose."

"Fuefehfehfeh! That's right! Do you understand what that means, Steven?" Foxy asked the youngest member of his crew.

The boy frowned and nodded. "It means you are going down, Pearl!"

"That's my boy! The third and final round of the Davy Back Fight is about to begin. Take your places for...Dash-Touch Domination!"

"...isn't that typically played with six people boss?" Porche asked quietly.

"...okay, HALF-Dash-Touch Domination then! There! Now it is completely different!" Foxy yelled. "Are you happy?!"

"Quite."

"Good! Let's get this over with already!"

The Third Round

High in the sky on Chuchun's back, the three commentators looked over a small island near the main island that the Davy Back Fight was primarily competed on. It was comprised of a large mountain with a single path carved into it. As the path reached the end of the mountain, it separated into two paths that jutted out into the sea. They looked both similar in size, but only one path was straight while the other was decidedly more perilous with twists and turns of every size.

"Folks, in another interesting turn of events, our beloved captain has made an agreement with the captain of the Straw Hats to change the final round of the Davy Back Fight from the original one-on-one duel between captains to an impromptu game of Half-Dash-Touch Domination! Isn't this just fantastic, my fellow commentators?" Itomimizu announced happily. It was very clear that he loved his job and enjoyed the ability to bounce off of Greg Universe and Connie Maheswaran.

"Mr. Ito, I would be more excited if I knew exactly WHAT Half-Dash-Touch Domination was," Connie admitted. "All I know is that the 'Half' was added because we are only playing with six players total as opposed to the apparent standard twelve."

"Connie, am I wrong in assuming that you're a kid?"

"What gave it away?" Connie chuckled.

"Your youthful complexion! Anyway, I assume you are familiar with the game Red Light, Green Light?"

"That I am...although I am surprised you have the exact same game in this dimension that we do in ours...that raises so many questions...such as where did this old man come from?" Connie pointed to a small, older gentleman with a beard that Itomimizu picked up moments ago. He wore a yellow tunic with green lining and a brown-purple hat.

"Hi," he waved.

"Oh, you don't know Tonjit?" Ito asked, seemingly surprised. "I thought all of you Straw Hats were here before we were. Regardless, he was stranded on this island on top of a pair of very tall stilts for ten years and was only recently freed thanks to your companions. He's kept to himself and his horse for the majority of the game so far I suppose."

"Ten years?! On stilts?! Wait, I have so many questions!" Greg chimed in, clearly perplexed. **"Why didn't you just jump down into the ocean or something?"**

"I'm afraid of heights."

"How did you eat?" Connie asked.

"Fruit from tall trees."

"How did you drink water?" Connie asked another question.

"Rainfall."

"How did you go to the bathroom?" Greg asked the most important question of them all.

"AHEM!" Itomimizu coughed, trying to return the conversation back to its intended purpose. "To answer your original question, the one that ACTUALLY MATTERS, Tonjit here will be the one making the calls for the game since he is an impartial spectator and since heights are his thing."

"Don't patronize me," Tonjit scowled.

"The objective of the game is to, quite simply, race to the top of the mountain! However, just as in our beloved childhood game, the second the old man says 'Red Light,' all players must refrain from moving. If they move, they are kicked out of the race! If they are knocked off the island into the ocean below, they are out! Finally, unlike in our last game, weapons ARE allowed. A fun time should be had by all!"

"Hold on, did you say 'knocked off the island?'" Greg asked.
"Two-thirds of our team ate Devil Fruits! They'll sink!"

"Then we can only hope that your Straw Hat and chocolatier can keep it together!" Itomimizu shrugged. "Ah! It seems like the two teams are getting into position!"

Connie peered down below and frowned. "The Straw Hats get the convoluted path. Why am I not surprised?"

"If Tonjit is ready, we can begin! Davy Back Fight set! Ready? Go!"

GWMAPT

"I do NOT feel comfortable doing this!" Pearl protested profusely.

The Gem, chocolatier, and pirate captain were positioned at the bottom of the mountain course, waiting for the game to officially begin. Pearl, for her part, was ready to do anything to reclaim Steven back and to be done with the silly nonsense that was the Davy Back Fight. However, Pearl never could have imagined having to compete against Steven himself. If there was one individual that she wanted to compete against less, it was the son of her Rose Quartz.

Fighting Steven competitively like this was like fighting Rose...which destroyed the Gem internally.

"Just think of it like this: if you DON'T compete, Steven will be stuck on the Sexy Foxy. Tell me..." Petrea clutched her favorite parasol and looked over to Steven on the path. "Do you want him sailing around for the rest of his days on a ship like that?"

"Oh my stars, no!" Pearl shook her head. "The thought of that terrible man's influence on Steven...it repulses me!"

"Speaking of repulsive men...that guy over there is really familiar to me...but I don't know from where..." Petrea tapped her finger to the side of her face as her gaze shifted from Steven to the pirate known as Phil.

"Perhaps you came across him while you were doing those horrific acts of violence you were prone to in the past?" Pearl suggested, causing the chocolatier to blush and look down in shame. However, the woman suddenly jerked her head up and narrowed her eyes.

"What? Have I jogged your memory?"

"You did...after reminding me what a terrible person I was in the process...I think...no, it couldn't be..." Petrea groaned. "I think he was a part of Baroque Works!"

"No way!" Luffy, who had barely been paying attention to their conversation while he was stretching, jumped in shock. "That funny guy was a part of Baroque Works too?"

"It is hard to say...but there is a chance that he might have been the Agent below Damian: Mr. 6. He has the right attitude...if I recall him correctly," Petrea bit her lip as she continued to stare him down. "But what are the odds that he would be here? There are literally four other reformed members of Baroque Works here not including him. The thought that he would be the same person is just... ludicrous!"

"If this trivial matter is truly bothering you, why don't you just ask your archaeologist when this game is over? Wasn't she the public face of your little criminal club? I feel like she would know him just by looking at him," Pearl regained focus on the matter at hand. "Right now, the only thing we should be focusing on is Steven!"

Petrea nodded her head, returning her focus to the matter at hand. If they won this game, Steven would be able to return home and continue to save the world from the Cluster. If not...well, Petrea did not know what the Gems would do. Would they pledge themselves to Foxy's crew to remain with him or would they steal him back and call it "mutiny?" Either way, it was not something the former Miss Valentine wished to see come to pass. Everyone was counting on her to save the day, and she intended on doing it.

In the sky, she could hear Connie, Greg, and Foxy's announcer prattle on with the rules. Based on what they were saying, anything went in this game so long as they did not fall into the ocean below... and into a watery grave. Things were about to get rough, but she knew that she was doing this for the only cause that mattered:

Steven.

"If Tonjit is ready, we can begin!" the announcer exclaimed. Petrea knew that it was now or never. "Davy Back Fight set! Ready? Go!"

In an instant, the two teams began to run as fast as they could up the mountain. Luffy, in a stroke of genius, grabbed onto two rocks and stretched himself back as far as he could. Shooting himself like a rubber band, Luffy began to soar in the air. The pirate began to laugh to himself as he prepared himself to land on the top of the island. "Shishishishi! This is going to be easy!"

"Good thinking, Luffy!" Petrea heard Pearl announce as she jumped past several rocks, giving her a decent advantage over the others. She looked to the other path and saw the heavysset pirate plowing through the course as fast as he could while Phil, for his part, was moving at a brisk pace. As for Steven, the boy seemed like he was trying to save his strength for the more arduous parts of the climb. There were times that she forgot how young he was and others where she was amazed at his age.

This time, it was the former.

The chocolatier was pleased that Luffy was about to practically win the game for them right off of the bat. Typically by this point, something terrible would happen to hinder...

"Uh...Red Light," the voice of Tonjit called out, much to the shock and horror of the Straw Hats.

Petrea forced herself to stop running before she was kicked out of the game. Pearl had managed to stop herself as well, amassing quite a bit of distance along the way. As for Luffy...he had just landed mere moments after Tonjit made the call.

GWMAPT

"Straw Hat Luffy moved during a call of 'Red Light!'" Itomimizu cheered. "The Straw Hats are now down to only two players!"

"Luffy should have realized that this kind of game couldn't just be finished in three minutes," Connie shook her head. "It never works out like that. Ever."

"Hey, I don't blame the guy for trying. Even I think that this is starting to go on a bit too much," Greg added. **"How long do these games typically go on for?"**

"Eh," Itomimizu shrugged. "It's hard to say. Usually it goes by really quickly, but this is the first time another team has ever won a game against us. Honestly, I'm surprised that the boss hasn't interfered with this round yet."

"I think that Garnet has that covered," Connie laughed, pointing down to Garnet. The tall Gem was cracking her knuckles and looking menacingly at Foxy and his crew. It seemed like even they were beginning to fear and respect the Gem warrior...though they were mainly afraid of her.

GWMAPT

"Of all the nerve!" Pearl twitched her eye and fought the impulse to smack her head in frustration. "They did that on purpose!"

Despite Luffy being removed from the game almost immediately, Petrea and Pearl were still going strong. Foxy's team had remained in play as well and were doing their best to keep still. For Phil and Kibageru, it was easy. In Steven's case, he was stuck balancing on one foot like a clown. A part of Pearl hoped that he would trip and fall over, but she knew that Foxy would say he was intentionally cheating.

"Actually, I think that old guy was friends with the Straw Hats. I think it was just Luffy being rash!"

"Then we need to be mindful and not overexert ourselves," Pearl grumbled. "Oh, these children's games are so...so...pointless!"

"...I'm guessing Amethyst was the one who played those kind of games with Steven, wasn't she? Kyahahahaha!" Petrea allowed herself a laugh while keeping herself perfectly still.

"Actually, I mainly played Red Light, Green Light with my dad!" Steven called to them while keeping balance. Though he was the furthest behind, he could still hear what they were talking about. "But

all the Gems liked to play games with me...they still do! You should see Pearl at cards and Garnet at Hide-And-Go-Seek...though thinking back, I'm sure she was using her Future Vision to..."

"Stop talking and play the damn game!" the heavyset man yelled at Steven. "If I'm going to be on a crew with you, you will damn well learn to keep to yourself!"

Pearl was about to verbally assault the Foxy Pirate before she heard Tonijt speak out "Green Light." Knowing that she had to cover as much distance as possible before he changed his mind, Pearl ignored the man and ran to her gemstone's content.

"She's getting ahead!" she heard the rude one yell. "I've got this!"

The distinctive cock of a gun filled the air as Pearl whirled around just in time to see the man shoot a gun directly at her. Though she was fired on by laser pistols during several of her travels throughout the Multiverse, this was the first time in recent memory that she recalled being fired upon by an actual pistol that shot bullets. The man had no doubt hoped to catch the Gem unawares.

Too bad for him.

The second the bullet was about to hit Pearl, she created two of her famous staffs. Swiping down in a swift motion, she sliced the bullet in half with the first staff, causing it to strike the rocky terrain behind her. She then threw her second staff directly at the mustachioed gentleman. Her thoughts about the man proved correct as he began to cry and jump away like a screaming child.

As he was whining, the man called Phil whistled and overtook his place. He tapped his staff to the ground and continued to walk at his own pace. "Mind the opening, you big baby, and get focused!"

"HOW DID SHE DO THAT?! I DIDN'T KNOW SHE..." he continued to panic as he tripped on a convenient opening in the ground. The man began to tumble over until he landed right on the side of the cliff. "OH THANK GOD! I DIDN'T FALL!"

Pearl took the opportunity to throw one more staff at him, causing

him to inch backwards off of the cliff in fear. Normally she would feel bad about doing that to a human, but he had dared to insult her Steven. However, the moment had passed and she pressed on to win the competition.

"Kibageru has fallen out of bounds! The Foxy Pirates are now down one player!" Itomimizu shouted from his bird perch.

"The number of players are now tied! How exciting!" Connie added as well.

The Gem allowed herself to get a glimpse of how Steven was holding up. The boy was now panting but doing his best to keep up with the others. Based on the look of awe on his face, it was clear to Pearl that he had witnessed her elegant display of ability. She wasn't sure if she was comfortable with Steven watching her dispose of other humans using her weapons, but she dismissed the thought.

After all, it was only a human game.

GWMAPT

Steven was not sure if he was having fun or not.

He always tried to keep a positive attitude in any situation and, for the most part, he had continued to do so throughout the Davy Back Fight (though he was saddened that nobody outside of Connie and Pearl seemed to understand his Steven Tag game). However, things took a turn for the worst when the guy who looked like Dr. Rabatnik from the *Sanic the Hedgehog* games (he refused to call him Dr. Eggomen) pulled out a gun on Pearl. The action caused Steven to evaluate the situation.

He knew that Pearl would be fine if she were actually shot. Her body was strong enough to withstand such an attack and Steven knew that all it would take was a short trip into her gemstone to heal had her body required it. But what if the man had shot Petrea? She was flesh and blood. A gunshot would seriously hurt her and potentially...

Steven refused to even think of the word.

His healing powers were still unpredictable on his own, but he was confident that fusing with Luffy to save his friends would give him the necessary strength to secure proper healing spit. After all, he was two-for-two with healing as Lufven. However, he hadn't fused with Luffy since the duel with Crocodile. Though they had managed to come out on top in the end, it was only because of Sardonyx's intervention that they had even survived. It was something that scared him, but he tried not to think about that. After all, fusion was a good thing.

In the end, Pearl handled the situation with her usual grace, but it seemed like she hadn't stopped him by herself. Right before Pearl retaliated against the gun-wielding pirate, Steven saw Phil groan and shake his head. He thought he heard him muttering to himself as he scanned the ground. "...how do I get him to stop crying? It is embarrassing! What opening can I exploit to snap him out of it to get him angry again? His weight? His ego?"

The half-Gem was not sure what to make of the odd man. He seemed incredibly rude to Foxy, yet did not treat Steven the same way. In fact, he joked around with him as they were waiting for the game to start. The two of them had annoyed Dr. Rabatnik (Steven had no desire to learn the pirate's real name after his attempt to shoot Pearl) right from the get-go, which he felt bad about initially. Given the recent events of the past minute, he reevaluated that feeling.

"Red Light!"

Steven stopped very quickly before he could be called out of the game and refocused his attention back to the challenge at hand. Pearl had continued to remain in the lead, but Petrea and Phil were about equal with each other. Though he was still in last, Steven was truly giving it his all...without summoning his bubble or shield. He did not want to actually use them if he did not have to. He noticed that Petrea and Phil were talking to each other, so Steven tried to listen in to hear what they were saying.

"Valley Girl! I thought I smelled lemons! Fancy seeing you here,"

Phil chuckled. He had posed himself with his staff in a cool pose right as Tonjit stopped them from moving. "Still tipping the scale?"

"Oh god, it IS you," Petrea gagged in her mouth. "What the hell are you doing here?!"

"You heard my 'captain.' He had an opening in his crew and I filled it to escape the Marines after everything started going south with Baroque Works," Phil smiled. "Openings are kind of my thing... though I never got to enjoy yours..."

"YOU PERVERT!" Petrea fought every urge she had to kill him right there.

"I was referring to the promotion that I was bound to get for your defection!" Phil explained himself and blushed. "Jeez...you've got a mind in the gutter. There are children present."

Steven just listened and tried to figure out what was so wrong with that comment. He did not know that Phil was a former member of Baroque Works, but he didn't hold that against him. Redeeming Baroque Works members was kind of his thing so it made him happy to see another person out to sea as opposed to trying to topple a country. Still, it was crazy to think that there was another member of the group in the game.

What were the odds?

"...now I remember why I blocked you out of my memory."

"Why? The kid finds me funny. Speaking of kids, I heard you were rolling with Goldilocks too. She still finger painting?"

"Ask her yourself..." Petrea muttered. "...just say 'Green Light' already, old man..."

"I think I will! If it wasn't for her and Candlejack recruiting me, I wouldn't have been in Baroque Works. If I wasn't in Baroque Works, I wouldn't be here. Funny how things go full circle?"

"Just. Stop. Talking."

"What? I found an opening in the game and I wanted to use it to converse with an old friend. What is wrong with that?"

"Green Light!" the voice of Tonjit rang out much to Petrea's joy.

"FINALLY! THANK GOD!" Petrea yelled as she jumped in the air while clutching her parasol. "JUST...STAY AWAY AND SHUT UP!"

Phil shrugged and looked to Steven. "Was it something I said?"

The half-Gem shrugged and continued to move toward victory. Phil, sensing that he wasn't going to get an answer, sighed and clutched his staff. "Boring conversation anyway. Time to end this so I can move on with my life and focus on the things that really matter."

For the first time in the competition, the former Mr. 6 started to run up the mountain. Steven was impressed by his speed, even running underneath Petrea. The chocolatier had jumped up on an angle to cover as much ground as she could. There was no actual wind in the air, so she had to direct herself based on how she launched herself upwards. Steven knew that there was a scientific explanation behind it, but he did not have enough knowledge about the subject to know exactly what it was.

"Excuse me, Big Bird!" Phil said as he caught up with Pearl, who was taken back at the sight of a human keeping up with her. "Coming through!"

"Wha...?! How did you get here so fast?" Pearl asked in shock.

"Just looked for the easy path. It's really easy when your eyes are opened to all of those things..." the man grinned. "Now if you don't mind, I've got a game to win!"

"No you don't!" Pearl shouted and summoned her weapon yet again. "No human can overtake a Gem that easily!"

"I'll take my chances. You think waving that fancy spear is going to intimidate me? Please. Mine's better," Phil laughed and twirled his own staff around.

As the two continued their climb, they began to trade blows with

each other. Every move that Pearl made was met by Phil, much to her surprise. By the same token, Phil seemed impressed that the Gem was keeping up with him.

"Your stance is perfect! No openings at all! Your center line is perfectly defended!" Phil let out a low whistle of admiration as he parried away her attack. "This is exciting!"

"You are far more proficient with that weapon than I initially gave you credit for," Pearl returned the compliment, attempting to land a single strike on the man.

"I didn't know you cared, Beaky," he blushed.

The two running duelists intensified their attacks as they managed to avoid every obstacle along the way. It was turning into quite the spectacle for everyone watching to behold. Steven could not stop trying to figure out how the two of them were managing attacking and climbing at the same time. He hoped Pearl would show him how to do that one day.

"Red Light!"

Upon the utterance of the two words, all of the players froze in their respective places. For Petrea, she was floating perfectly still in the air thanks to the lack of wind. She was close to the top of the mountain course, but she had to continue to land to the ground and jump towards her goal. It reminded Steven of watching Lars jump on his trampoline, but with weight changing powers and a rocky terrain. However, it was Pearl and Phil that impressed Steven the most. The two had forced themselves to stop just as they were striking each other. Their weapons were crossed and they were stuck staring at each other. Steven couldn't make it out completely, but he thought he saw Phil making funny faces at Pearl. He could only imagine how angry Pearl must be.

"Green Light!"

Immediately, their duel resumed and Steven stared up to the top of the course. He was not looking forward to this climb and was already starting to lose steam, but he had to press on. Both of his

teams were counting on him. *"I'm gonna go...go...go! There's no stopping me!"* Steven panted and sang to himself. *"I'm burning through the sky! Two hundred degrees! That's why they call me Mr. Fahrenheit! I'm burning at the speed of light!"*

As he was singing to himself, he failed to see what was going on in front of him. Pearl and Phil were deep in combat as they raced closer and closer to the top. The two looked up to see Petrea fall down near them while laughing. "Give him hell, Pearl! Snap that wimpy stick of his in two!"

In that moment, the calm and amused demeanor of Phil completely disappeared. In its place was a being of pure anger and rage. As such, his movements became rather erratic and out of control; yet it seemed like he was still capable of countering Pearl's continued blows.

"THIS IS NOT A STICK!" Phil freaked out. "A STICK CAN BE BROKEN IN TWO WHEN YOU STEP ON IT! THIS? YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT *THIS* IS?! *THIS IS A WEAPON!*"

The man intensified his attacks as Petrea continued to laugh, causing Phil to get angrier and angrier. Finally, he jumped away from Pearl and pointed his staff at her. "YOU STAY OUT OF THIS!" However, he had not realized the strength and quickness of his movements. As he pointed the staff at Petrea, he had accidentally let go of the object. Flying directly at her, Petrea took the opportunity to make another jump towards her goal. The staff found a new target in its place:

"Don't stop me now! I don't want to stop at all! Yeah!" Steven sang to himself energetically. As he did so, he noticed the giant staff about to hit his face. "Gah!" The half-Gem instinctively held up his hands and produced a bubble to shield himself. Unfortunately, the power behind the throw and the tired state of a young boy overexerting himself do not mix well.

The bubbled boy was thrown back by the weapon, causing Steven to roll down the hill and right off of the cliff. The boy started to scream as he realized just what was happening. "Oh no! I'm falling!"

"MY STAFF!" Phil lamented as he looked torn between retrieving his prized weapon and finishing the race. In the end, he made a run to get his weapon before it fell into the water like his teammate. The Foxy Pirates watching could be heard screaming in frustration at his selfish choice.

"MY STEVEN!" Pearl yelled as she bolted down to save Steven from the waves below the cliff, completely forgetting the game at hand. She dived off of the cliff and reached him before anything could hurt him.

GWMAPT

"In yet another surprising turn of events, the Gem known as Pearl forfeited the game to dive into the water after the newest member of the Foxy Pirates! What an amazing race this is turning into!" Itomimizu shouted excitedly.

"I don't know how much of a race this is anymore," Connie pointed out. "Look! Phil is so busy trying to retrieve his stick that he has completely let Petrea take the lead. She is literally about to win!"

"IT'S NOT A STICK!" the voice of Phil yelled to them angrily.
"GAAH! YOU KNOW NOTHING OF PERFECTION!"

"AND IN THE TIME IT TOOK PHIL TO MAKE THAT LAST INSULT TO OUR YOUNG COMMENTATOR, THE GAME HAS OFFICIALLY ENDED! THE STRAW HAT PIRATES WIN THE GAME IN A STUNNING TURN AROUND THAT NOBODY COULD HAVE SEEN COMING!" Itomimizu roared exaggeratedly. "THE BLONDE CHOCOLATIER MADE IT TO THE TOP USING HER DEVIL FRUIT POWERS AND CLAIMED VICTORY! THE FOXY PIRATES HAVE ACTUALLY *LOST* A THREE ROUND DAVY BACK FIGHT!"

"That means we can take Steven back!" Connie cheered happily.

"OH THANK YOU! THANK YOU!" Greg cried the manliest tears a father could shed. **"I AM SO HAPPY! THANK YOU!"**

GWMAPT

"WE DID IT!" Luffy cheered triumphantly after claiming Steven back

as a Straw Hat pirate. "WE WON!"

"No thanks to you!" Nami shook her head you almost ruined everything for us!"

"Don't be mad, Nami! It all worked out!" Steven smiled and ran to hug her. The sight of Steven happy and excited caused Nami to lighten up and enjoy the moment with her crew. "Now we can celebrate my birthday together!"

"WOO-HOO!" Amethyst join in the jubilation. "WE STOMPED YO FACES IN! HOW YOU LIKE THAT FOXY MAN?!"

Pearl rubbed her temples in frustration and sighed. "Amethyst, calm yourself down. I know that this is a moment of great joy, but reel it in!"

"Party pooper!" Amethyst stuck her tongue out at the taller Gem and crossed her arms. "Besides, we almost lost by you jumping in after Steven. He would have been fine!"

"I..." Pearl started to get flustered and embarrassed. "I...forgot myself!"

"You're just lucky chocolate-girl kept her head in the game!" Amethyst gave Petrea a high five as she freed herself from Sanji's grip. "Good going, girl!"

"Foxy Pirate or not, I knew Steven could handle himself. After all, I've seen him do it a few times, including knocking Damian off along with him! Kyahahahaha!" Petrea allowed herself a laugh. She looked up and saw Phil wander over to her, clutching his precious staff. "Oh no. It's you."

"Valley Girl, let me make one thing clear. Do you see this?" Phil held up his weapon. "This is not a stick. It has never been a stick. It will never be a stick. Trust me. I know. Are we clear?!"

Petrea, just wanting it to end, nodded and sighed. "I'm sorry for insulting your precious...staff? Is that better?"

"...it's a start," Phil shrugged. He then looked to Pearl and gave her

a nod. "I've got to say, I was not expecting that show back there. You're pretty damn cool when you show off. That was the most fun I have had in years."

"And that was the best fight I have had with a human since...well, I suppose a month ago," Pearl admitted. "A match well-fought!"

"A match well-fought," Phil agreed. He scanned the Straw Hat crew and frowned. "Say, where's the finger painter? Isn't she a part of your crew?"

"She's getting us some of that mutton," Garnet pointed towards the vendors. "If you move now, you'll catch her."

"Don't mind if I do! Thanks for the advice, Shades!" Phil waved to her and began to walk away. He stopped for a moment and regarded Steven. "And sorry for knocking you off, kid! I wasn't planning on it! I'd stay and chat, but Goldilocks calls!"

The second he got out of sight, Garnet looked down to Damian and Sanji and smiled. "He left. You can come out now."

With that, Geneveive made herself known. It seemed as if she was hiding behind the taller forms of her friends to stay out of Phil's sight. She sighed and shuddered. "Thanks guys. I really do NOT want to reopen those memories right now."

"I agree. It is time to put all of this nonsense behind us," Pearl sighed with relief. "This was a fun party game, but it just all seemed so pointless in the end!"

"End?" Foxy announced, making his way towards the celebrating pirate crew. The cheering stopped as Foxy began to laugh maniacally. "Did you really think this was the end?! Oh yes, this particular Davy Back Fight is over and my winning streak is dashed, but there is something all of you have overlooked!"

"Oh. Do go on," Garnet said dryly.

"...you aren't the least bit curious to hear what my genius plan is?" Foxy asked, dejected that his opponents were not taking him seriously again. "At all?"

"No. Not really. We have a cake to eat and a party to start."

"The only thing that is going to start is ANOTHER DAVY BACK FIGHT! FUEFEHFEHFEH!" Foxy announced while chortling to himself. The other Foxy Pirates joined in as well, leaving the Straw Hats a combination of confused and annoyed.

"...uh...we aren't playing another Davy Back Fight. No way," Luffy shook his head and cocked his head in confusion. "I didn't agree to that."

"Ah! But aren't you forgetting the initial Davy Back Fight; the one that started it all?!" Foxy pointed out to the ocean. "We tossed three coins into the sea to offer Davy Jones! Three! Coins! We only played ONE game from that Davy Back Fight: the Donut Race! Davy Jones is owed two more challenges!"

"Hold it! I thought that Luffy agreed to start up a whole new Davy Back Fight in its place! Wouldn't that negate the other two coins all together?!" Nami yelled in shock.

"You should have listened to me carefully, little girl," Foxy sneered. "I asked if your captain would be willing to throw three new coins into the ocean...I never asked if he wanted to negate the previous Davy Back Fight!"

"He can't be serious...can he?" Nami looked to Luffy and then to the Gems.

Pearl touched her forehead and replayed the events she witnessed in the game before stopping at an image of Foxy. *"Now, since we have so many new competitors, would my opponent be opposed with me throwing three new coins into the ocean as our offering since the original game was...dare I even say it...rigged?"*

"That shitty bastard! He caught us in wordplay! I hate it when people do that!" Sanji cursed. "Don't tell me we have to keep playing this stupid game!"

"Hey, it could be fun!" Steven said, trying to remain optimistic. "Maybe there are some cool..." Steven started to continue his

hopeful thoughts before looking at the faces of the Crystal Gems, Straw Hats, and Peridot. All of them looked like they wanted to do anything other than continue the Davy Back Fight at all. "...or not..."

"Isn't there ANY way we can just call it a day and move on?" Luffy asked hopefully. "We'd really appreciate it, split-head!"

"STOP CALLING ME THAT!" Foxy yelled. "And no! I will not stop this Davy Back Fight for ANY reason...except..."

As the pirate paused theatrically to let the anticipation build up, the Straw Hats and Crystal Gems just waited in anger. "I'm going to regret this..." Pearl sighed. "Except what?"

"I will agree to lower the games from two to one...under two conditions! The first is simple: I will finally have my promised round of Combat against you Monkey D. Luffy!" Foxy pointed at Luffy, who shrugged and nodded his head. "And the second one is the kicker: we will have the ability wager all of our crews instead of merely individual members!"

"WHAT?!"

"That's right, fools! It is the price for cheating Davy Jones out of a game. However, since it seems the numbers are a bit off, I believe that your descendants would have to continue to work for my descendants until the number of children is equal to the size of my current crew! So, what is it going to be? Are you going to play the two games and risk only losing two people, or will you take the fast way out and risk your children's children?!"

The Straw Hats and Crystal Gems were silent as they took in the ludicrous proposal Foxy was offering. "...that is the stupidest thing I have ever heard," Genevieve commented.

"Only a complete idiot would even think of accepting that challenge," Peridot muttered. "There is no logical reason why anyone would ever..."

"Okay! I'll do the one round of Combat! One last game to settle it all!" Luffy shook Foxy's hand, much to the horror of his crew.

"Fantastic choice! This makes it all so much more worth it! Fuefehfehfeh!" Foxy chuckled to himself as his crew began to cheer loudly. As for the others, they just stood there dumbfounded and in complete shock at Luffy's actions.

"Robin?"

"...yes, Miss Peridot?" Robin asked, still processing what was happening.

"I am beginning to see what you mean about 'throwing logic out of the window.'"

The Duel Between Captains

After a short rest to grab food, Luffy and Foxy were required to spin a cannon to determine where the final duel would take place. Naturally, it landed on the Sexy Foxy. With the arena chosen, Luffy was forced by the Foxy Pirates to get changed for his personal duel with their captain. Usopp, claiming to be his manager, had joined him into the changing room in order to prepare his "pupil." As Luffy had no idea what any of that meant, he had no objections to one of his oldest friends being by his side as he readied himself to show off in front of the Crystal Gems for the first time. It was a big moment for the captain, as he truly enjoyed their company and hoped they would enjoy their time with the Straw Hats. He was not the best at picking up things, but he could see that the only two Gems who seemed to truly be getting involved with his crew as a whole were Steven and Amethyst. He could not read Garnet at all and knew that Pearl was not the kind of Gem to enjoy this kind of fun.

He would work on that.

As for Peridot, Luffy was not as concerned about her presence as his manager was. Though she apparently did some really bad things back on Steven's world, Luffy was always one for second chances. He was a lot like Steven in that regard. The proof could be seen purely in the amount of Baroque Works members the crew had gained as allies since Steven arrived. Would they have turned over a new leaf on their own had Steven not been here? Perhaps. Still, Luffy would have given them a chance if they apologized for interrupting the giants' duel back on Little Garden. He would extend Peridot that same courtesy when all was said and done.

"Wow! Look at all of these nifty outfits!" Luffy exclaimed as he looked around Foxy's changing room. "What's the deal with them?"

The member of Foxy's crew that walked them to the room shrugged. "Eh, the boss likes to fight in style. The only mandatory item here is boxing gloves. Feel free to dress yourself any way you see fit. I'll be outside for when you finish."

With that, the two pirates were alone in a sea of costumes. Most of them looked ridiculous and completely unfitting for a boxer, which is the style of fighting Foxy requested for the duel. However, after a moment of looking around, Usopp stopped dead in his tracks and gazed upon a most glorious sight.

"Luffy. This is it. This is perfect!" Usopp walked over and picked up the majestic item in question. "Do you have any idea how foolish Foxy was for leaving this lying around?"

The captain cocked his head in confusion and got a good look at what his sniper was referring to. "Wait...is that...?"

"It is. This is our key to victory. Since the dawn of man, people have always questioned the inherent powers that something like this would hold. Can this only be wielded by the powerful or do those who wield it obtain great power?" Usopp asked in a completely serious manner.

"Is that true?" Luffy asked in awe.

"Just look at Garnet. She is hands down the most powerful member of the Crystal Gems. Why do you think that is, Luffy?"

"Because she's taller?"

"Because she wields the mightiest power of all: the power of the afro," Usopp elaborated as he put both of his hands on his captain's shoulders. "Luffy...this might be the most important turning point of your life. Are you man enough to try to harness this eternal and untapped power?"

"I am!"

"Are you man enough to become a true experience?"

"I am!"

"Are you man enough to pull off this look and look damn good doing it?!"

"I AM!"

"Then we have work to do...let's find some sunglasses..."

GWMAPT

In the crowds, Steven was enjoying finally having a moment to talk to his friends without a Davy Back Fight going on around him. True, this was merely a moment's rest from the action, but it was one that Steven was going to relish. This birthday had truly turned into something unexpected and wonderful.

"So, basically what you are telling us is that your world is going to become one giant Gem...thing...if you don't stop this 'Cluster' from emerging?" Nami asked the birthday boy, who was explaining his present situation to the crew while sharing cotton candy with Chopper. "That is quite possibly the most terrifying thing I have ever heard of."

"What about that hippo-guy from Chopper's island?" Damian asked.

"...shut up, Damian," Nami groaned as she rolled her eyes at him. "It sounds like you have a lot on your plate again, Steven. Is there ever a dull moment in Beach City?"

"Well, sometimes things calm down and I can have small adventures with my friends...but I haven't had a chance to do that since you guys left. This was my first time seeing someone besides the Gems and Lion in a month!" Steven shoved a large piece of cotton candy in his mouth. "I'm just happy that I could be included!"

"We wouldn't have it any other way, squirt," Sanji elbowed him. "It's been quiet without your optimism and songs filling the void. We could use a bit of good old-fashioned fun for a bit."

Steven's eyes widened and formed stars. The boy grinned and gave the cook a huge hug. Sanji resisted at first, but sighed and accepted it all the same. "Shitty kid..."

"Language!" Steven said playfully, seemingly accepting of his nakama's insistence to swear.

"Who wants some pizza?" a most familiar voice called to Steven from the other side of the stands. Steven looked over and saw three

of his favorite things coming right toward him: Connie, his father, and pizza.

"PIZZA!" Amethyst jumped up for joy and practically knocked over Chopper to reach her prize.

"Dad! Connie!" Steven jumped up and ran over to them. "What are you guys doing down here?"

"Eh, if I didn't come down to grab something to eat, I would have passed out up there," Greg chuckled. "Besides, I just had to see you now that you are back on the winning team! I...Amethyst, here's some leftover money that Ito gave me. Get your own pie so the rest of us can enjoy a late lunch."

"Done!" Amethyst grabbed the money and disappeared into the sea of Foxy Pirates.

"It just goes to show you that pizza is the best way to celebrate anything!" Steven laughed and grabbed a slice from his father. He then acknowledged Connie, who was slightly bushing. "Connie, you are doing so great up there! You have such a way with words!"

The young girl's face reddened. "Well, somebody has to give an objective review of the games at hand. Mr. Ito might be funny to banter with, but he kind of wears his favoritism proudly."

"Really? I didn't notice!"

"That's because you are you, Steven!" Connie laughed. "You only notice the good in people. That's what I like about you!"

Now it was Steven's turn to blush. "You do? It's not just because of the Gems and sword fighting and the adventures?"

"Those are just bonuses!" Connie smiled. "You're my best friend, Steven Universe, just because of who you are!"

What was left of Steven's pupils turned into a solar system of stars. The half-Gem was literally floating on a cloud. He took pride in knowing that he and Connie were truly best friends and, deep down, was happy to reaffirm that Connie seemed to like him for him just as

much as he liked her for her.

She was his best friend. She was his jam bud.

"Not to be the interrupting kind of dad that you see on television all the time, but we don't have long before we have to get back on the bird...which is a sentence I just uttered. Why don't we all sit down and share in this delicious pirate pizza?" Greg suggested. It was clear that he didn't want to step on Steven's toes and to take this moment away from him, but he was right. They did not have that much time left before the final match began.

"That's a great idea, Mr. Universe," Connie said quickly. She sat down next to Steven and the two of them ate their pizza in an awkward, yet happy, silence. The pirates looked on the scene with bemusement and interest. It seemed like they were heavily invested in the growing friendship of Steven and Connie.

"...so...uh...what do you want to do tonight for your birthday, Steven?" Genevieve coughed, hoping to break the ice. "What do fourteen-year-old boys do in your dimension?"

"I don't know! I've never been fourteen before today!" Steven chuckled, causing the painter to groan. "I just want to have a good time with my friends and family. Maybe we can sing and dance?"

"I should have known," she sighed.

"Maybe we can get Zoro drunk enough to sing too," Damian laughed as he elbowed the swordsman in the ribs.

"The day I sing is the day I quit drinking," Zoro grumbled.

"I'll hold you to that," Garnet added, keeping to herself.

Picking up on that, Steven couldn't help but notice that the other Gems were really distant from the others. This was the first time that Garnet or Pearl acknowledged the pirates since they entered the stands. It was as if they were purposely being anti-social...except Amethyst who was gloriously devouring her pizza in a disgusting way to make Chopper laugh and Pearl scowl. However, Steven was pleased to see that Peridot was actually talking to Robin. He knew

that she was still dealing with a lot, so it was nice to see that she was working on it by making a friend.

Now he just had to work on getting Pearl and Garnet more involved...which Steven knew would be a difficult challenge. However, he was up to the task.

"Hey!" the voice of Itomimizu shouted, running over to Greg and Connie. "Are you two joining me or what? It's time to start the show!"

"Already?" Greg sighed and handed the remainder of his pizza to his son. "Come on, Connie. Let's get this over with. Steven, guard that pizza with your life. I'm going to want that when I'm done!"

"Anything for you, dear old dad!" Steven saluted and waved goodbye. He stopped and gave a smaller wave to Connie. "Um... see you soon, Connie!"

"See you soon, Steven," she smiled and joined the two other commentators.

As Steven watched his father and best friend walk away, a few light chuckles were heard. Damian, Zoro, and Amethyst could not stop laughing...until Nami, Petrea, and Pearl scolded them for being rude.

"What? This is adorable!" Amethyst defended herself.

"Hush, Amethyst! That was uncalled for and you know it!" Pearl shook her head.

"What was uncalled for?" Steven asked, confused as to what was going on. He heard the laughing but didn't see anything wrong with it.

"Well..." Pearl began to explain before getting cut off by the booming voice of the commentators.

"The preparations are complete! The most exciting event of the day is finally starting!" Itomimizu exclaimed. "Don't be alarmed by the smoke, kids! This is all part of the show!"

The smoke he was referring to was being shot out of the various cannons on the ship. It was darkening the sky, allowing two projections to be seen: the wanted posters of Luffy and Foxy. As the Foxy Pirates cheered, the Straw Hats were more confused than anything.

"...is this whole game just a way to stroke that weird human's ego?" Peridot asked.

"I'm afraid so," Robin sighed. "I'm afraid so."

"On the left...he is the returning champion of the Combat round with a record of 920 straight wins! He is the captain of the Foxy Pirates and our faithful boss..." Itomimizu yelled with all of his might. He acknowledged the mast of the Sexy Foxy dropping down revealing the man in question shirtless with only suspenders keeping his pants up and boxing gloves to cover his hands. "FOXY THE SILVER FOX!"

Foxy raised his hands high in the air to soak up the adoration his crew was praising upon him. To him, this was his crowning achievement. This was going to be his greatest fight ever and he knew it. All he had to do was take down Luffy, which Steven knew was not going to happen. He believed in Luffy and knew that he would do anything to save his friends.

"Ah, but coming in on the right is the captain of the Straw Hat pirates! He took down the dreaded Crocodile and helped save a desert kingdom! He has an amazing bounty of 100 million berries...it is time to introduce the one...the only...MONKEY D. LUFFY!" Connie took up Luffy's side of the commentary.

Entering from the opposing side of the field, a cloaked figure emerged. There was something different in his movements... something confident. Steven didn't quite know what it was, but suddenly all was revealed. Casting it off, Luffy revealed himself to be wearing a mighty afro wig with sunglasses on his face. His chest was painted with a teal skull and crossbones and his boxing gloves had a crude yellow star painted on the sides.

"Oh. My. Gosh," Greg's jaw dropped. **"Is that...is he...?"**

"It is. He is," Connie could not stop laughing at the incredible sight.

From the crowds, the various Foxy Pirates looked on in awe at the beautiful sight of Luffy with an afro. Though he was disliked by them, they could not deny that the pirate had style. Even Foxy was impressed by his opponent. It was clear that Luffy had made a lasting impression on them.

The same could be said for the Straw Hats and Gems, though for different reasons.

"...there are no words that can describe just how amazing this is," Damian whispered. He wiped away a single tear from his cheek. "Damn it; that is beautiful."

"LUFFY LOOKS SO COOL!" Chopper shouted.

"Why the hell was Usopp allowed to be the coach?" Zoro groaned.

"This is so embarrassing," Nami hid her face in her hands. "He can't stay serious for two seconds."

"I think he looks just fine, Miss Navigator," Robin chuckled.

"How can you say that?! He is making a mockery of Garnet!" Pearl threw her hands up in frustration. "This is just offensive!"

Steven, who thought this was the greatest outfit he had seen since he saw his father's disco outfit that time he used Future Vision with Garnet, had no idea how the Gem would take it. He was very clearly trying to emulate Garnet, but would she take it as an insult or as a compliment? As usual, it was hard to read Garnet's expression. Finally, she got up and called over to Luffy.

"Pirate Captain Luffy!" she yelled. The pirate in question stopped jabbing the air and looked over to her. She raised up a hand and gave him a thumbs up. "Looking sharp."

"Damn straight," Luffy nodded in an approximation of Garnet's light accent.

"Alright, it is time for the seconds to leave the ring!" Itomimizu yelled.

"That means you long-nose!"

"OY!" Usopp growled. Before he left, Luffy handed him the sunglasses and cracked his neck. Usopp looked him straight in the eye and nodded. "Remember, don't let the power of the afro overtake you. Stay in control."

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

As Usopp rejoined his comrades, Itomimizu began to reiterate the rules. "As I explained earlier, the battlefield is our ship. This means both the deck and every room underneath it. The field can also include the terrain in a hundred meter radius of the ship's mast. There is no set time limit and the game ends when a combatant earns a single point."

"The anticipation is killing me! Who will win? The underdog with the mighty afro or the experienced captain?" Connie asked. "We are just going to have to watch and find out!"

"That we are! The clash between the two captains is about to begin and the fate of their crews is in their hands! LET THE GAME BEGIN!" Itomimizu shouted.

The ringing of a bell was heard throughout the island and the two combatants began to trade blows. As they were doing so, Garnet nudged Usopp, who had the color drain from his face. "I see this was your idea."

"...yes?" Usopp whispered weakly.

"I think he's ready for its power," Garnet responded dryly, referring to her mighty hair.

"We can only hope," Usopp nodded grimly. "For our sakes."

"...at least you started him off with a round afro. I don't think he could handle a square one just yet," Garnet smirked.

"...are...are you being serious, Garnet?!" Pearl asked, clearly in shock at what her companion was saying. "What does that even mean?!"

Garnet merely smiled.

GWMAPT

The duel had continued on for a good half hour. Foxy was using his Slow-Slow powers to his advantage, landing multiple hits on Luffy throughout the match. It was literally hurting Steven to see his friend get beaten up so bad. Steven knew that Luffy would eventually come out on top, but watching Foxy pummel him was painful. The only two things keeping him calm were his belief in his captain and Usopp's assertions that Luffy's afro would give him the necessary strength to prevail (which was neither confirmed nor denied by Garnet, much to Pearl's frustration).

For a period of time, they were fighting in the ship and Steven could not see what was going on. It worried him to be left in the dark, but then something happened to make Steven's fears grow. An explosion occurred from beneath the deck and smoke covered the ship. Steven could barely see two shadows in the smoke, but it soon became apparent that Foxy was still standing while the smoking form of Luffy was shattered on the ground. He was still and lifeless as Foxy cheered over his body.

"The boss is still standing! Could this be it?! Could the Foxy Pirates have prevailed yet again?!" Itomimizu shouted with joy.

"It looks like Luffy was badly burned! What the heck happened down there?!" Greg asked while barely hiding his shock. **"How do you get burned by punches?!"**

"That's it!" Steven stood up and moved to go toward the arena. "He needs my help!"

"Steven, what are you doing?!" Pearl asked. "You heard the obnoxious announcer-person! We are unable to interfere with the duel!"

"But if the two of us fused, we could technically be considered the same person! We could argue that and..." Steven continued to try to leave the stands before finding his path blocked by Zoro's sword.

"No," the swordsman stated. "You're not doing this."

"But he needs me!"

"No, he doesn't!" Zoro barked at him. "He is a warrior and a man! He can fight his own battles! Don't you know what that means?"

"I...I just don't want him to get hurt!" Steven tried to explain himself. "He's getting beaten up really badly and..."

"Steven," Zoro sighed and got down to his level. "You need to understand that there are several ways to wound people. Yes; you and Luffy fusing might win the fight easier than if he did it alone, but Luffy would still be hurting. The difference is that the pain would have been brought about by you, not split-head."

"What? How would I hurt him?" the half-Gem asked.

"You would hurt his pride. Right after you and the Gems brought us back to the Grand Line, we found ourselves on a little island called Jaya. By this time, word had not gotten out about our bounties and we were confronted by some weird looking pirate...Bullwinkle or something like that..."

"It was Bellamy, you shitty moss-head," Sanji shook his head.

"What he said," Zoro flipped Sanji off. "Anyway, he started to mock Luffy, claiming he was a weak captain and that he wouldn't amount to anything...typical taunting. However, one of Bellamy's pirates apparently heard through the grapevine about Crocodile's defeat...I blame Pearl showing part of your fight to the people of Alabasta. That kind of stuff is hard to contain even after the government tries to cover it up. Despite not believing him because our wanted posters had not yet been distributed, Bellamy proceeded to break him down mentally. He mocked him for potentially needing a child and a woman to fight his battles...his words, not mine. Though he didn't show it to him, Luffy was really shaken up by it. He began to doubt his own strength and his fighting abilities. He was not sure if he could have beaten Crocodile by himself anymore. He set out to prove to himself that he could defeat any opponent he took on when we ended up in Skypeia, including going one-on-one with God

himself."

Steven just stood there and took in his words. He did not mean to cause Luffy to second-guess his own abilities. He knew what that was like when the Gems or his dad would question his own abilities. It pained him to realize the psychological damage that he caused his friend. All he wanted was the best for him...but in the end he would have only caused more pain.

As he was thinking about Zoro's story, Luffy managed to pull himself together and stood up. Though he was bleeding and clearly in pain, he did not back down. He would not fall nor, Steven believed, would he fall again. It was awe inspiring to watch and it reminded him that Luffy was far from typical.

He was the man who was going to be the Pirate King.

"See? He could handle himself," Zoro smiled. He noticed the remorseful expression on Steven's face and then the vengeful expressions on the ladies' and Gems' faces. "You going to be okay? I wasn't trying to..."

"No...no, I needed to hear that. Thank you, Zoro," Steven whispered. "I just wanted to help him."

"Please, you had blondie bring birthday cake," Zoro grinned. "If you don't think that will help then you don't know our captain."

The two began to laugh as the others looked on, shocked at the touching display Zoro gave to Steven. "...at what point did Zoro become a mush?" Petrea asked. "Did we miss something?"

"I blame Connie," Genevieve shrugged.

"Am I supposed to be understanding any of this...nonsense?" Peridot asked.

"Honestly, I don't think you would be understand this even if you took the time to know us," Nami responded.

"...took the time to know you?' Hmm..." the green Gem tapped her finger to her face. "You...uh...Miss Navigator, tell me your life story!"

Nami just stared. "...really? Right now? Do you honestly think this is the time to be doing this?"

"Yes? There is no better time like the present...right?" Peridot chuckled weakly. "...right?" When she realized that she was not going to get Nami's backstory, she hung her head in shame. "Aww."

GWMAPT

No matter how many times Foxy hit Luffy, he kept getting back up. Foxy continued to pelt Luffy with punches, kicks, and bombs, but his will continued to outweigh the pain caused by his trickery. He had even resorted to using his greatest invention, the "Slow-Slow Beam Sword," to lock him in place while he rushed him with punches. It was enough to kill a lesser man.

And yet Luffy endured.

"How...how are you still standing?" Foxy asked, clearly irritated at the situation. "This is becoming tiresome. Your damn afro can't protect you forever so just give up! Stay down damn you!"

"Tiresome? 'Give up?'" Luffy asked weakly while still imitating Garnet's accent. "The only thing that is tiresome is your second-rate lightsaber. If you think I am going to give up, you have another thing coming! You might be fighting to keep your title, but I am fighting for something more! I am fighting for my nakama...AND FOR THEM I WILL FIGHT TO THE DEATH!"

Though Luffy could not see it, nearly every pirate began to cry at the sheer force of will that Luffy displayed. Whether it was because of his words or their perception about his wig, the Foxy Pirates began to respect Luffy in that moment. Even Itomimizu was crying as he continued to commentate. "This...I have said this a lot over the course of this Davy Back Fight, but THIS is truly a Davy Back Fight for the ages. Look at this man: his legs are shaking, his body is smoking, he is out of breath, blood is pouring out of every open wound he has, and yet he does not give up. He still has it. And why? For the sake of his nakama! THIS is why Davy Back Fights continue to thrive! THIS is why captains fight for their crew. No matter how this game ends, all I can say is thank you. Thank you, Straw Hat

Luffy."

"**Ito...that was really touching, buddy,**" Greg patted his back.
"**You have a way with words.**"

"The amazing thing is that Mr. Ito isn't alone! Listen to the crowd! Even the Foxy Pirates are chanting for Luffy! This is unexpected and moving at the same time!" Connie exclaimed.

It was true. Every pirate from Foxy's crew (save the ever-loyal Porche and Hamburg) were chanting Luffy's name. Pearl, who was more confused than inspired, just sat there dumbfounded. "Is this really happening? How did his speech reach all of these people? Does Foxy just treat his men that badly?"

"It has to do with his conviction, Pearl," Garnet explained.
"Regardless of how the fox-man may or may not treat his men, Pirate Captain Luffy just has more heart than he does. That is why that man will accomplish his dreams here. That is why his crew follows him."

Pearl couldn't stop herself from smiling as she watched Foxy and Luffy continue to trade blows with intense ferocity. "I suppose that is admirable...and inspiring. His determination is comparable to Rose's now that I think about it."

"I can see that," Garnet nodded. "He'll make a good Pirate King one day."

Now linking Luffy to Rose Quartz, Pearl continued to watch the fight with a renewed interest. Luffy had now performed his "Gum-Gum Gatling Gun" technique, which was tearing into Foxy with speed and strength that surprised the Gem. She could not believe that a human could have that much power, regardless of his Devil Fruit. Even still, Foxy continued to match his blows. Neither would fall and neither would give up.

"How can a dying man still have strength?!" Foxy gasped. Finally, he pointed at Luffy and shouted his next attack. "**Slow-Slow Beam!**"

Unfortunately, the two fighters just stayed perfectly still. This

confused the audience, who were trying to figure out just what had happened. "Is one of them going to faint?" Steven asked.

"Look! Luffy is still moving!" Greg shouted with joy at the sight of the pirate moving from his spot. **"But Foxy isn't! What the heck is happening?!"**

"I...have no idea," Connie admitted. "Mr. Ito? Do you have any idea?"

"I'm just as lost as...wait! Straw Hat dropped something from his gloves! Is that...IT IS! STRAW HAT LUFFY PULLED OUT A PIECE OF A MIRROR!" Itomimizu yelled in shock. "THE ONE SUBSTANCE THAT THE BOSS' 'SLOW-SLOW BEAM' CAN BOUNCE OFF OF!"

"That means that Foxy is stuck for thirty seconds!" Connie realized.

"That means that Foxy is going to get attacked for thirty seconds, Connie," Greg corrected.

"This got stuck in my afro when we were dueling below the deck," Luffy grinned. "The power of the afro is real, Foxy. You should never have left this lying around."

"...you...little...shit..." Foxy managed to get out at a slow pace. As he was doing so, Luffy whirled his hand around and prepared to strike Foxy with everything he had. "...oh...shit..."

"GUM-GUM FLAIL!"

Foxy took the punch like a man and remained in place. At first, it seemed like he was unaffected by the action. However it soon became apparent that it was due to the 'Slow-Slow Beam' keeping him in place. After his thirty seconds were up, Foxy felt the full force of the blow and was sent flying out of bounds into the ocean below.

"FOR THE FATEFUL BATTLE OF THIS FINAL ROUND OF THE DAVY BACK FIGHT, OUR CAPTAIN HAS FALLEN AFTER 920 STRAIGHT WINS!" Itomimizu announced theatrically. **"THE WINNER OF THE COMBAT ROUND IS MONKEY D. LUFFY!"**

There was much rejoicing.

GWMAPT

After fishing Foxy out of the water and celebrating the win, Luffy was found collapsed on the ground getting bandaged up by Chopper. He was assisted by Connie, who loaned him the medical equipment that her mother gave her. The pirate captain had finally started to stir and looked around to see his friends all around him.

"Did...did I win?" he asked weakly.

"You won, dude!" Amethyst grabbed him and punched him in the arm. "You were amazing out there!"

"DON'T HIT HIM! ARE YOU TRYING TO KILL HIM?!" Chopper looked shocked at the disregard to Luffy's injuries.

However, the captain just laid back down and smiled. "Good. I...I didn't want to lose any of my friends today. Besides, I've got birthday cake to look forward to! I needed to win for that!"

With that, all of the Straw Hats began to laugh. Even Pearl found herself laughing, though Peridot merely faked it to fit in with them. However, the laughing was cut short at the appearance of Foxy himself.

"STRAW HAT!" he growled. "YOU RUINED MY PERFECT RECORD! I ONLY HAVE ONE THING TO SAY TO YOU..."

Foxy extended a hand and adopted a serious expression. "Good game...brother."

The second Luffy went to accept the handshake, Foxy tried to throw him overhead. Unfortunately for him, Luffy's arm was made of rubber so it just sent him flying to the ground. The pirate captain got up and looked angry. "Fine! Whatever! You win! I guess we are now members of your crew! Are you happy now?!"

"You are?" Luffy asked.

"Yes! If you recall, the stakes for the game were for both crews!"

Itomimizu reminded him, now on the ground with Connie and Greg. "We are all technically Straw Hats now."

"But I don't want to sail with them!" Porche wailed and cried. "The one with the long nose is really weird!"

"Oh," Luffy looked at the massive amount of people who would be required to join his crew and frowned. "Uh, don't take this the wrong way...but do I have to take all of you?"

Itomimizu blinked and frowned. "...that is to say...you technically do not HAVE to take all of the crew if you desire, but you need to take SOMETHING in order to follow the code of the game."

"Okay! Then I know what I am going to choose! I choose...your flag!" Luffy pointed to the Jolly Roger of the Foxy Pirates.

"WHAT?!" the entire field yelled at once.

"LUFFY! DO YOU NOT SEE ALL OF THE BEAUTIFUL WOMEN ON THAT SHIP?! WE ARE NOT GOING TO HAVE ANOTHER CHANCE AT THIS!" Sanji pointed out desperately.

"Though the pirate is crude, I do believe that you should at least pick someone who would benefit your crew a bit," Pearl suggested. "I don't see a shipwright or even a marksman on your ship..."

"I'M RIGHT HERE!" Usopp yelled. "I'M THE MARKSMAN!"

"Really? I thought you were the liar. I always wondered why that was a position here..." Pearl shrugged.

"WHAT KIND OF A PIRATE SHIP WOULD DO THAT?!"

"What kind of a ship has a reindeer as a doctor?" Pearl countered.

Usopp opened his mouth to argue and closed it, knowing there was no point. Thankfully, Foxy himself put a stop to that conversation. "HOW COULD YOU BE SO HEARTLESS?! YOU DIDN'T EVEN HESITATE BEFORE YOU TOOK THE PRIDE OF THE FOXY PIRATES AWAY FROM US!"

"What? I just want your flag. If I took the sail, you guys would be stuck here."

"But...but our Jolly Roger is ON our sail!" Foxy pointed out. "How do you expect us to?"

"I'll paint you a new one!" Luffy offered excitedly.

"Really? You would do that?" Foxy asked, legitimately touched by the offer.

"Sure I would! Genevieve, may I see your paintbrush?"

The painter looked down at her paints and back at her captain.

"Do...do you want me to paint it? I don't have a problem..."

"Nope! I'm going to do it!" Luffy smiled merrily. Genevieve opened her mouth to complain, closed it, and sighed. She handed him the paintbrush and Luffy got straight to work. Five minutes later, Luffy presented the Foxy Pirates with their new flag.

"I...what IS that?" Itomimizu asked. "Is that a lion?"

"It's a fox!" Luffy laughed. "Doesn't it look great?"

In all actuality, the crude drawing barely resembled anything known on this planet. The Foxy Pirates hanged their heads in embarrassment of their new logo and the Straw Hats could barely control their laughter and disappointment in their captain's skills.

As for Genevieve? She banged her head on a wall in frustration.

"Oh! Wait! Can I ask for one more thing before you go?" Luffy asked, seeing the Foxy Pirates head to their ship. "Is that allowed, announcer guy?"

"Considering we all should have been part of your crew...that should not be a problem," Itomimizu offered. "Do you have a problem with that, captain?"

"I KNEW THAT HE WOULD GET GREEDY!" Foxy yelled. "YOU GAVE US A CRAPPY FLAG AND NOW YOU WANT MORE?!"

WHAT MORE COULD YOU POSSIBLY WANT FROM US?!"

"I want that Phil-guy!" Luffy pointed to the familiar figure in the distance, keeping to himself and eating. He put down his food and pointed to himself.

"Me?"

"Him? Why the hell do you want him?" Foxy asked.

"Yes, Luffy. Why the hell do you want him?!" Genevieve asked suddenly with a hint of panic in her voice and a bruise on her head. "Please don't take him!"

"But he was a part of Baroque Works and he seems kind of unhappy here. I want to give him a choice!" Luffy smiled. "Hey! Phil...that's your name, right?"

The former Mr. 6 walked over, staff in hand, and nodded. He was very confused by the situation, though his eyes did light up when he spied Genevieve. "There you are, Goldilocks!"

"Hide me!"

"Look, I don't know if you want to join our crew, stick with Foxy's crew, or just do your own thing, but you seem to be the only one who is kind of unhappy here," Luffy explained. "If you had the choice, what would you want to do?"

"I...what?! Why the hell are you asking me what I want?"

"Because you made Steven laugh!" Luffy pointed to the birthday boy, who was holding a piece of cake that he was handing off to Foxy. "What do you say? Do you want to join my crew?"

"My god, no!" Phil shook his head and laughed. "Do you have any idea how annoying the 'Mr. 5 Pair' is? I can handle a lot, but that is way too much for me."

"Fair enough," Luffy said, much to Damian and Petrea's anger. "So, what do you want?"

"I...that's funny. Nobody has ever asked me that here before," Phil smirked. "What I want...what I really want is to set sail by myself. I'm done with this whole crew thing. Too many people for my liking."

"If that's what you want, then that's fine with me! Split-head, let Phil do his own thing!" Luffy shouted over to Foxy, who was eating his cake and crying.

"This is delicious! Seriously this is the best cake I have ever...what?! Is that it? Fine, if that's what he wants! Quick, me,, let's get the hell out of here before he decides he wants more!" Foxy bowed in respect to Steven, who blushed.

With that, the Foxy Pirates quickly gathered up their belongings and made their way back to the Sexy Foxy. Itomimizu gave a heartfelt farewell to Greg and in no time at all, the only people left on the island were the Straw Hats, the Crystal Gems, Tonjit, his horse, and the mysterious Phil. The man in question looked over the Straw Hats and snorted. "So, this rag-tag band of misfits is trying to become the crew of the Pirate King? Heh. I can see it happening. But seriously, why did you give me this chance? It can't just be because I made the kid laugh."

"No, that is exactly in line with our captain," Nami sighed. "He's empathetic in that way."

"It's true. Petrea, Damian, Genevieve, and Robin were all part of Baroque Works and they are now part of my crew! I figured since we didn't actually fight against you in Alabasta you might not be that bad! I believe that everybody deserves a chance," Luffy shrugged and extended a hand to the man. "Good luck out there!"

Phil looked down and accepted the handshake. Unlike his previous boss, he actually finished it. "I appreciate this, Straw Hat. You know something? I have something for you clowns."

He walked over to the small row boat that Foxy left for him and rummaged through his bags. Finally, he pulled out a small Den Den Mushi and handed it over to Luffy. "If you guys are ever in a pinch, give me a ring and I'll see if there is an opening in my schedule. I figure I owe you guys one, so why not?"

"Wow! Thank you, Phil!" Steven said. "That was very kind of you!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Still, I have to be careful. We've all been lucky so far, but I don't want what happened to the other members of our colorful club to happen to me," Phil said as he returned to his boat.

"What? You mean go to jail for trying to overthrow a country?" Petrea asked. "I think we will be fine."

"Do you clowns not read the paper? Didn't you hear what happened three days ago?"

The Straw Hats were silent as they thought about it. "We...we were kind of in the sky three days ago," Usopp admitted.

"And we were in another dimension," Damian added.

Phil blinked and ignored the comment. "Whatever. Regardless of your excuses, there was a major accident transporting the other Officer Agents to Impel Down. There were two ships carrying the big guys...you know, Mr. 4 through Mr. 0, and one of them got swallowed by the sea and disappeared."

"What?! You mean they are dead?!" Chopper asked in shock.

"I mean, probably, but there hasn't been any sign of them. The Marine ship was found destroyed days later, but Miss Doublefinger, Mr. 4, and Miss Merry Christmas were nowhere to be seen. The thing is, however, there was no land for miles and no ships missing. It is likely that their corpses are littering the belly of a Sea King as we speak. The funny thing is that the survivors on the other ship described the waves like it was grabbing and crushing the ship," Phil shrugged. "Either way, I am getting the hell away from this area as fast as I can. We are way too close to Impel Down and Eneis Lobby for my liking."

He jumped on his boat and nodded to them. "Straw Hats. Gem-people. Goldilocks. Until we meet again."

The Straw Hats were silent as they thought about Phil's story and the likely deaths of the other members of Baroque Works. Finally, it

was Amethyst who broke the ice. "Are we having a birthday party or not?"

GWMAPT

After leaving the island quickly on Garnet's insistence, the lively bunch began to do the one thing that mattered most: celebrating Steven's fourteenth birthday. Petrea was thrilled to finally show off her Cookie Cat cake (discounting the piece given to Foxy and an extra piece which was given to Tonjit before he was rescued by members of his family...Steven didn't understand it at all, but he seemed to like the cake and the flag that Luffy gave him so he didn't question it) and everybody but Zoro and Pearl prepared to eat it, but first Greg had to take a traditional picture of Steven with it. As he went to fetch the birthday cape and crown (which was in Connie's bag along with the rest of Greg's belongings), Connie handed Steven his birthday gift.

"You don't have to untie it...it's one of those boxes that make it look like I put a lot of time into wrapping it!" Connie chuckled nervously.

"Oh, you!" Steven said as he opened the box. He pulled out a pink button-up shirt and smiled. "A new shirt! What a pretty color!"

"I agree!" Damian added. "Good choice there, Connie!"

"You should try it on and wear it in the picture!" Connie suggested.

With that, Steven put the new shirt on over his old one and was pleased to see that it fit perfectly. At that moment, Greg returned with the birthday attire put it on Steven. The birthday boy smiled next to his cake and once the cell phone picture was taken (along with a quick sketch by Genevieve) he blew out the candles to much applause.

"This is going to stand out in the baby book!" Greg smiled as he looked at his son. "I mean, it's a new shirt! We've always just used your star shirt."

"Oh yeah! You mentioned the baby book before!" Connie pointed out. "Can we see it, Mr. Universe?"

"Sure can! It's...right here!" Greg said as he ruffled around in Connie's bag. Everybody gathered around to look at the baby pictures, much to Steven's embarrassment. At first, they started off normal enough for baby pictures. By the time they reached the pictures of Steven's eighth birthday, everyone began to notice something puzzling and strange.

"Is this the same picture over and over again but with a different cake?" Usopp asked.

"No, I take this picture every year!" Steven said, confused as to why he would ask that.

"But...but you have looked the same since you were eight!" Usopp pointed to the pictures. "I KNEW you looked too young to be fourteen!"

"Woah, it looks like you stagnated there a little bit, buddy," Greg looked at his son and frowned. However, that quickly turned into a smile as he wanted to keep positive. "Oh well. Stranger things have happened. I mean, look at Genevieve. She looks like she is eight too."

"I do not!"

The comment caused the Straw Hats to laugh and for the comments about Steven's appearance to stop for the moment. Only Connie looked concerned, but she let that feeling pass as she focused on her cake and having a good time with Steven. Thankfully, it seemed that the others were distracting Steven enough to mask her concern. She decided that there was no point in worrying about it now during a party and resolved to ask Pearl or Greg about it in the morning. Once the cake concluded, Greg started to take on the role of DJ, preparing to play songs that he knew his son liked. "All right you crazy pirates, do I have any requests? I know Damian loves to sing Vanessa Abadeer's hit single 'Haven't You Noticed I'm A Star!'"

"Dad, can you play a march? I just got a great idea for a party game!" Steven asked excitedly as he blew one of his party kazoos that Pearl brought along in her gem.

"Party games?! That sounds awesome!" Luffy grinned.

"Can I play a march? Of course I can! I'm a music-man now through and through! You need trombones? I'll make the sound of seventy-six of them! What are you thinking of, champ?" Greg asked his son.

"Let's play a musical improv game! Everyone can make up a verse and turn it into a silly song! It could be great!"

The pirates began to give uneasy looks to each other. Some, like Luffy, seemed excited. Others, like Sanji and Zoro, started to back away to grab another hard drink in the hopes of disappearing in the background.

"...uh, Steven, we aren't like you. We can't just make up rhymes off the top of our heads," Chopper pointed out. "At least I can't..."

"Rubbish, Chopper!" Steven shook his head and smiled. "There's nothing to it! Come on, this is going to be fun! Dad, do you think you're up to it?"

"Sure am, sport! I think I know what you are talking about...am I playing in F or F Major?" Greg adjusted his air keyboard by playing the two chords.

"Definitely F Major. Make it go something like this..." Steven began to whistle a tune which was then added to by Greg, nodding his head as he went along. "That's it! Okay, so I'll go first and then you guys follow along!"

Steven started to clap to the rhythm, which was followed by Garnet joining in. Soon anyone who could follow along (be they sober or drunk) did the same. Feeling confident enough, Steven began to sing. *"A friend of mine came up to me and told me I was lying. I said that I'm a human being and certainly not a lion!"*

"Oh hum! The tune is dumb, the words don't mean a thing! Isn't this a silly song for everyone to sing?" Steven and Greg sang together.

The pirates and Gems merely stared at the two Universe boys laughing along and singing. It appeared this was not what they expected for a "party game."

"...THIS qualifies as entertainment?" Peridot inquired. "This is ridiculous! I do not get this 'singing!'"

"I thought all Gems sing," Petrea raised an eyebrow. "Interesting."

"I'm with the runt. Count me out," Zoro shook his head and focused on his drink. "There is no way I am going to sing."

"Honestly, we really should have saw this coming," Genevieve admitted. "Who else but Steven would ask us to sing as a birthday game?"

"Come on! Stop leaving us hanging! Someone else try!" Steven pleaded to his friends.

"I'll volunteer as tribute this time!" Connie stepped forward, blushing as she did so. "Um...I...oh! Okay. *I had sword lessons at my school that made me want to frown. But when I did it with the Gems, my frown turned upside down!*"

"*Oh hum! The tune is dumb, the words don't mean a thing! Isn't this a silly song for everyone sing?*" the Universes sang with Connie, who was now holding Steven's hand tight. The action was not lost on most of the onlookers yet not a word was said. However, Pearl was about to comment on it when she was cut off by Garnet chiming in.

"*I am a being made of love, just not from one, but two. Yet I wouldn't break it up unless it was for you,*" she smiled at the two of them and gave a quick stern look to Pearl, who got the message.

The four of them sang the chorus, with Steven laughing and blushing at the same time. The Straw Hats, however, merely looked on in confusion at both the sight transpiring before their eyes and what exactly Garnet said. Only Usopp and Nami seemed to have expressions that showed an understanding of the improvised lyrics.

"I'm not hearing anything from the pirates and former denizens of the Grand Line!" Steven pointed out. "Don't make me pull birthday rank on you!"

The crew exchanged glances at each other, seemingly hoping

someone else would take the stage as Greg continued his tune. Finally, a lone voice stepped up confidently. *"My name is Robin, very true, but it's ravens I adore. Why you ask? Quite simply this: to quote it 'Nevermore!'"*

"Yes! Go, Robin!" Steven laughed and gave her a hug as Greg and Garnet sang on in his place. The archaeologist ruffled the boy's hair and returned the hug.

"That was a reference to Poe!" Connie said excitedly. "You've been reading the book I bought you?"

"It's one of my most valued possessions," Robin admitted to the girl. "I do love a good book...especially if there is a good story behind it."

"Does Robin seem...happier to you?" Usopp asked Nami, as the two of them stared at the sight in amazement.

"It seems like the kids bring out the best in her," Nami smiled. "Good for her. She's come a long way in a month."

"That boy has that effect on people. I bet he could turn Fleet Admiral Sengoku into a pirate lover if he tried," Usopp laughed.

GWMAPT

Upon the party's conclusion, nearly everybody went to bed. Garnet, Pearl, Peridot, and Robin remained on deck while the others slept in their respective quarters. For some, sleep was a very easy thing to do. It was a long, exhausting day with a lot of physical activity.

Yet Connie Maheswaran could not rest.

She quietly sneaked out of the women's quarters and made her way to the deck. The questions about Steven were just gnawing away at her and she really needed to talk to someone about it. She weakly waved to the four that were still awake as she carefully entered the deck.

"Oh look! It's...umm...the human female who is friends with Steven!" Peridot pointed out. She groaned as she tried to remember her name. "Don't tell me! I've got this! I've got this!"

"Couldn't sleep, Connie?" Robin asked. "Or did you have a nightmare?"

"I TOLD YOU NOT TO TELL ME!"

"I couldn't sleep. I had a lot on my mind," Connie sighed. "Can...can I talk to you guys?"

"Of course you may, Connie," Pearl answered, looking concerned. "Are you alright? Are you injured?"

"No! No, I am fine, but I'm just...I don't know what to make of today."

"Oh, that is fine. Today was confusing for me too," Pearl laughed. "It is best just to put that behind us and..."

"She is talking about Steven, Pearl," Garnet cut her off. "You are concerned about Steven's appearance."

"I am...I just...is he going to grow up?" Connie asked fearfully. "Is he going to stay the same age forever?"

"Connie, you need to know something about Gems. We change our appearance all of the time. We can shapeshift and regenerate, but Steven? Steven is unique," Pearl sighed. "We have no idea what his appearance will be as he grows up or how long it will take him to do so. But at the birthday party Steven threw for us last year, Steven did grow up to become an elderly man, so he does have the ability to age. We just do not know when he will do so."

"But he CAN age?" Connie's eyes widened hopefully.

"Just like you and me it seems," Robin smiled. "But if he couldn't, would that be a problem? Would that change anything?"

"No...no, it wouldn't," she sighed. "I just...I just want to be there for him. I want to know what he has to face so I can do it with him."

"And you will, if he wants you to," Robin pointed out. "You have nothing to fear, Connie, except for the unknown."

"Thank you, guys...I needed that," Connie smiled and then flashed

one to Peridot too. "Even you, Peridot. You'll get my name right one day."

"I...wow, thanks," she blushed.

"Still, before I head back to bed, I wanted to ask you something, Robin. How have you liked your books?"

The archaeologist created a hand which passed over the book that she was reading. "I must say, this Poe is a literary genius. The way he writes...it is truly amazing."

"What kind of books do you have here, Robin? Anything good?" Connie asked curiously.

"That is subjective, my dear. Still, we have a lot of good books and stories. Would you care to hear one before you return to sleep?"

"A book?"

"No...I was thinking of an old legend. It's been around for longer than most recorded history, but it changes from person to person. The oldest version was located in the Ohara Library...which ceased to be years ago," Robin stared out at the ocean before returning her gaze back to Connie and the Gems. "Interested?"

"A Grand Line version of *Beowulf*? Of course I am!" Connie replied eagerly.

"I too wish to know more about your human culture, so enlighten us about this legend...please?" Peridot joined in.

"Well, this story begins a long time ago. There once was a king who was known for his piety towards an influential Sea God. To give thanks to the benevolent king, the Sea God gave him a great gift: a breastplate that contained the twelve jewels of the sea. These jewels granted him great power over the sea itself and blessed his kingdom with peace and prosperity for as long he and his descendants continued to rule over it."

"Jewels that can control the sea?" Pearl asked, listening in as well. "You have that power here?"

"Perhaps once upon a time. But there was a catch to this agreement: the king was also given a box that he was never allowed to open. You see, it contained the twelve legions of malevolent spirits who wielded a power so great that they could destroy the world. The box was kept shut and the peace lasted for decades under the king's reign until a foolish man dared open the box to see what's inside of it."

"What a stupid clod," Peridot snorted. "What unspeakable evil did he unleash?"

"The legions of evil; all led by four demon generals, who personally laid waste and destroyed the kingdom. The first was a spirit who took control a maiden by tempting her to succumb to her vices and transformed her into a beast with fur like lavender who devoured all who crossed her path. The second was a creature with unnatural green skin and abnormally long limbs which could track its prey wherever it went. The third is a decadent dragon who was once a loyal servant to the Sea God. However, it abandoned its duties by stealing a great power which it used on its enemies to satisfy its bloodlust. The last was once a small human who devoured is four siblings."

"Revolting!"

"Quite. Each one of the siblings it ate caused the human to grow to a giant, monstrous beast. As with the jewels of the sea, these beasts could be trapped away in a small part of their bodies, where it would stay until it was ready to strike again. If a normal person picked up this evil jewel, it would possess them or, if the host passed on, their next of kin. They could only be recognized by the jewel embedded in their host's skin."

"...what?" Pearl asked, clearly invested in the story. "They had jewels in their skin?"

"That is what the legend says."

"Intriguing," Garnet nodded. "Please continue, Nico Robin."

"Gladly. After destroying the kingdom, the generals went on a

rampage that was only stopped by the champion of the Sea God: his daughter. She, along with three heroes, came up with a plan to banish the spirits by using the jewels of the fallen king to create twelve stars to imprison each army. They would then banish them to the heavens before they could cause further harm to the world. Slowly but surely, the armies were stopped leaving only the generals alone. The battle between them shook the heavens until they too were banished. Of course, victory has its price: the three heroes who accompanied her perished during the battle and the daughter of the Sea God was left fatally wounded while sealing the great giant. It wasn't long before she succumbed to her wounds. She died when she fell into a volcano on the island where their battle took place. Legend says that the spirits are still out there, waiting to strike from the heavens to take revenge on the world that banished them away..."

Just as Robin finished, a strange sound was heard throughout the ship. Peridot jumped and looked around. "Gah! Is that the demon generals?! Have they come for us?!"

"That was the wind, Peridot," Connie chuckled. "Still, that was an amazing story! It is always fascinating to see literature from ancient times. The people were obviously trying to explain a natural occurrence, but what could it have been?"

"Who knows?" Robin shrugged. "That is a mystery in it of itself. One day, I hope to know the answer to that question and many more."

"Are there any other legends like this?" Pearl asked warily. "Legends involving jewels and weapons?"

"I am sure of it. I'll sleep on it and get back to you in the morning," Robin began to stretch. "I do believe that it is time for this night owl to head to bed. Connie, are you doing the same?"

The young girl nodded and wished the Gems goodnight. She returned to her sleeping bag and stared up at the ceiling. She was still excited from the story Robin told her, but her thoughts returned to Steven and his appearance. Robin and Garnet's words comforted her and she began to yawn. "It will all work out. When I wake up, Steven and I are going to have a fun day before heading home. I've

got a good feeling about this!"

The Morning Dilemma

The next morning, Connie woke up to yelling and a loud bang.

On one hand, this was not new to her. The Straw Hats were a very excitable group and tended to say and do things to annoy each other. Did that make them any less of friends? Of course not, but it wouldn't be the Going Merry without Sanji cursing at someone or Nami complaining about a stupid comment. Still, it would have been nice to have a few more minutes of rest.

She looked around the ladies' quarters and saw only two sleeping forms: Amethyst and Genevieve. She knew better than to try and wake a sleeping Gem, so she moved over to Genevieve and gently nudged her arm in the hopes of waking her up. "Morning, sleepyhead. I think there is some commotion happening on the deck."

"Not now, Mr. 3," she grumbled. "Just two more hours."

"Mr. 3?" Connie was confused, but then she remembered that he was her partner in Baroque Works. 'She must still be dreaming.'
"Nope! Rise and shine! We aren't here for very long so let's make every minute count! Don't force me to hit you with a pillow, Genevieve!"

The mention of her name caused the rosy-cheeked painter to open her eyes. She looked around and then back at Connie. The girl then scanned the room and practically jumped, which Connie noticed seem to be difficult for her to do. "Genevieve, are you okay? What's wrong?"

"How did you know that?" Genevieve asked defensively.

"How did I know what?" Connie cocked her head in confusion.
"What did I say?"

"How did you know my name?" Genevieve demanded.

The young Maheswaran stood there in shock. "...what?"

"Actually, where did you take me? And where is Mr. 3? He's not going to be happy when he comes for me," she told her in a calm yet defensive voice.

"I...you told me your name when I first met you. Are...are you okay? Did you hit your head in your sleep?" Connie was officially worried. What had happened to her friend?

"I have never seen you before in my life," Genevieve frowned. "I think I would have remembered you...then again, it is hard to think that far. When did we first meet?"

"A month ago...in Alabasta," Connie said, hoping that this would jog her memory.

"I've only ever been to Spiders Cafe in Alabasta...was it there?"

"No. We were below a casino. You were in a cage and we broke you out...do you remember ANY of this?" Connie was starting to get frazzled now. Why had this happened? Was this why there was yelling in the deck? Did everyone but her lose her memory?

Alternatively, was everything that happened before a false memory?

"Nope...say, can you hand me that paintbrush?" Genevieve pointed to the brush in the corner. Connie was about to instinctively grab it when she put the pieces together.

"...are you going to use a Color Trap on me?"

"What?"

"Why do you want the paintbrush? Are you using it to hypnotize me with your Color Traps?" Connie asked, knowing very well what Genevieve could do when threatened.

"How do you know about that?"

"Because I'm your friend! Your name is Genevieve! You don't write to your parents as much as you would like, but they are supportive of you being out in the world doing something! You used to go by Miss Goldenweek, but stopped when you quit Baroque Works! Your

dream is to be the greatest painter in the world...specifically this world! You like rice crackers and like to paint things that you have never seen before!" Connie practically shouted, doing her best to keep her composure while not waking Amethyst up. "Does ANY of that ring a bell?!"

Again, it was not wise to suddenly wake Amethyst up.

The painter just stood there and took in everything Connie just said. Finally, Connie handed her the brush and her palette of paint. "Here! If you are going to paint me, do it! You might not remember me, but I remember you!"

"Okay," Genevieve said after a moment. She stared intently at the paintbrush and frowned. "I believe you."

"What? You do?"

"You mentioned my parents. The only other person who knows about them is Mr. 3. If I told you about them, we must have been friends...or at least close acquaintances...I'm too lazy to think about it anymore than that."

"Genevieve, I wouldn't lie to you...honest!" Connie grabbed her hand. "We haven't known each other long, but you are one of my best friends!"

"I...I wish I could say more, but I don't even know your name," Genevieve blushed. "Who exactly are you?"

"Connie Mahesawaran," the girl said enthusiastically. It was important to Connie to attempt a positive attitude in this situation.

"So, you said I quit Baroque Works, right? What is the story behind that? The last thing I remember is traveling with Mr. 3 for one of the boss' missions."

"As far as I know, Steven convinced you that...actually, he should tell you this since he was there," Connie suggested. "Want to help me find him?"

"I might as well. I have no idea what is going on or where I am, so

anything helps and...why is that woman purple?"

"It's a long story."

GWMAPT

Steven was very confused when he woke up from his sleep.

For starters, he was not in his bed but rather in his caterpillar sleeping bag. However, he was not outside camping or anything like that. It appeared that he was on a ship out at sea. He was alone in some kind of weird room.

"What is this magical place of mystery?" Steven looked around in awe. "This is so pretty!"

The curious half-Gem began to explore the ship, leaving his sleeping bag where it was. It struck him as odd that he was on a ship, but Steven chalked it up as a test that the Gems were putting him through. Steven desperately wanted to be acknowledged as a full-time member of the Crystal Gems, but he knew that if he was going to do that he was going to at least figure out how to summon his shield.

But that was seemingly out of reach.

Still, Steven was nothing if not an optimist so he made his way around the strange vessel until he came across a young man in a straw hat climbing down a ladder from the deck. He looked to be a few years older than him, but still younger than his best friend in the world: Lars. Steven noted that he seemed to be just as curious as he was, but it caused Steven to question his initial assessment that this was a Gem mission. "Excuse me!"

"Hey, you're that kid in the caterpillar-thing!" the youth turned around and pointed excitedly. "Maybe you know what's going on! We decided not to wake you, but this is great! Is this your ship?"

"My ship? I'm twelve! How can I own a ship?" Steven laughed. "You don't know who owns this cool ship either?"

"Nope! I just woke up not that long ago to a whole bunch of weird

people. Nobody really knew what was going on and this one scary guy stormed out of the room. They all are on the deck, but I really wanted to explore the place. My name is Monkey D. Luffy!" Luffy waved.

"Steven Universe! So, there are other people on this ship too? Were there any...uh...girls, I guess, on this ship? Maybe one a little taller than you with a gemstone on her forehead or a small purple one?" Steven asked hopefully.

"I dunno. I got distracted. We all only woke up maybe ten minutes ago. There was a guy with a long nose who claimed to be the captain of the ship, a guy with curly eyebrows, the scary guy, and this balding guy with a beard and a wicked tan. I think there was an animal too, but he ran off..." Luffy shrugged. "Any of them ring a bell?"

"You said the balding guy had a tan? Did he have long brown hair too?"

"Yeah! It was super cool now that I think about it!" the young man nodded his head. "Do you know him?"

"That sounds like my awesome dad! Come on! Let's go find everyone!" Steven pointed to the door and began to walk. "If I'm on a ship, I want to meet everyone...especially if dad is here!"

"Okay...but when that's done, do you want to keep exploring the pirate ship with me?" Luffy asked hopefully.

Steven stopped walking immediately and turned around. "Did...did you say 'pirate ship?'"

"I did!"

"Like '*pillage and plunder and rifle and loot*' pirates?!" Steven pressed the question.

"Yup!"

"This. Is. Amazing!" Steven cheered. "I'm on a pirate ship! I can't wait to tell dad!"

"Then let's go!"

The two began their walk to the deck before passing a closed door. Inside, a panicked voice could be heard talking to himself. Luffy and Steven stopped to listen on the chance it would give them a clue about where they were. "Pull yourself together, Greg. You've been kidnapped and put on a pirate ship. The Gems will come and save you. Just you wait."

"That sounds like my dad!" Steven exclaimed and knocked on the door. "Dad? Is that you?"

"Steven?!" Greg's voice responded and opened up the door. He looked at his son and gave him a hug. "You're here too! Did the Gems come with you?"

"I don't know! I just woke up here! Did you say we were kidnapped?!"

"I don't know! It makes sense! You know I stay out of these magical Gem situations...it's for the best!" Greg sighed. "You know I'm of no use when it comes to this stuff."

"Don't say that! You are the best dad I've ever had!" Steven reminded him.

"I had always hoped that would be the case," Greg grinned, taking a calming breath. He then acknowledged Luffy and scratched his head. "Are you making friends with the pirates, Steven? Is that a good idea?"

"But he is so nice!" Steven pointed out. "Aren't you, Luffy?"

"I am, Mr. Universe! I'm Luffy!"

"I gathered," Greg eyed him over. "Well...if my boy vouches for you, I guess I'm fine with it. So, what's our plan to escape, sport? Do we have any idea how we got here or even where here is?"

"Maybe we are by the Jersey Shore!"

"...that wouldn't be that bad..." Greg mused to himself. "Where are

the other crazy pirate-people? That one guy with the sunglasses scared the daylights out of me!"

"Yeah, he was kind of weird...but he had a cool pink shirt though!" Luffy chimed in. "As far as I know, everybody is on deck. You guys want to check it out?"

"Yeah!" Steven said immediately.

"Is that smart? Shouldn't we...I don't know...stay here where they AREN'T?" Greg pleaded, clearly not comfortable with the situation.

"Nope! I'm a Crystal Gem, dad. I have to go where the action is!" Steven proudly exclaimed. "I'll come back for you."

"What's a 'Crystal Gem?'" Luffy asked as they climbed up toward the deck.

"Beach City's magical guardian protectors!"

"That's so cool!"

Greg looked to his son and back to his hiding place before groaning. "I just can't abandon my ten-year-old son like this," he grumbled to himself. "Wait for me!"

Upon reaching the deck, Steven noticed all of the people that Luffy mentioned along with two familiar faces. "Garnet! Pearl! You're here!"

"Oh, Steven! Thank goodness you seem to be okay!" Pearl sighed with relief. "It appears as if nearly every member of the crew has suffered from some kind of amnesia! I tried explaining who they were, but they were more interested in how they got here! Do you have...what's wrong, Steven?"

Pearl was referring to Steven staring at Garnet intently. At the same time, the other people on the deck had stopped to listen in the hopes of getting some answers with the exception of the scary man in the pink shirt, who was muttering to himself and keeping his distance. "Garnet...did...did your skin change color?"

The Gem stared at her arm and then back to the boy and frowned. "Pearl, I think Steven is affected by this as well."

"What? But he knows who we are!" Pearl argued the point. "Steven, tell me the last thing you remember!"

"Uh...we invited the Pizzas over for a barbecue on the beach. Then a giant blowfish arrived and we stopped it by playing volleyball!" Steven thought about it and nodded. "Yeah! That was fun."

The Gems exchanged worried looks as everyone else thought about what Steven said. "What the hell is this punk taking about? A pizza party with a blowfish?!" the man with the pink shirt demanded. "Nothing is making any sense! Where is Miss Valentine?"

"Calm down, buddy! We will help you find your friend!" the long-nosed one replied.

The man gave him a death glare, causing the younger pirate to jump. "Say one more word and I will bury you where you stand. Do you have any idea who I am and what I am capable of?!"

"No!" the pirate responded weakly.

"Why don't we all just relax? It's not going to do us any good standing here shouting at each other. I'm sure this boat has a kitchen. I'll cook us a good breakfast and then we can listen to what these two gorgeous ladies were trying to say again," the blond one smoking a cigarette grinned, blowing a kiss to Pearl and Garnet.

"...this is torture," Pearl gagged.

"Focus, Pearl. Steven is clearly affected by this same strange phenomenon. The last thing he remembered was the beach party we had with the Pizzas...that was one year and two months ago..." Garnet thought aloud.

"...fourteen months? That can't be a coincidence!" Pearl quickly caught on to Garnet's train of thought.

"What can't be a coincidence?" Luffy asked. "Wait, are you the Crystal Fems that Steven mentioned?"

"Gems! They are the Crystal Gems!" Steven pointed to them. "Oh! Does anyone have a ukulele? I wrote this great song about..."

"ENOUGH!" the man with the glasses pointed his finger at the group. It appeared he was playing around with his boogers. "THERE WILL BE NO SINGING UNTIL I GET ANSWERS!"

"Bomb-man, please restrain yourself!" Garnet pleaded. "When everyone is here, we will explain what we know and what we think."

"Wait...did you just say 'bomb-man?'" the long-nosed pirate gulped. "What does that mean?"

"Oh! So you know about my Devil Fruit powers? I guess my fame has preceded me," he grinned. "The destructive might of Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine is feared throughout the Grand Line!"

"Who?" Luffy, Steven, and the other pirate asked. Greg, on the other hand, stayed far away from them and hid behind a barrel.

"And what's a 'Grand Line?'" Greg asked.

"...we just always called you by your real name, Damian," Pearl admitted. "You gave up that silly code name before we met you."

"WHAT?! WHAT DID YOU CALL ME?!" the man called Mr. 5 shouted angrily. "WHO THE HELL TOLD YOU THAT?!"

"...you did," Pearl groaned, not intimidated at all by the man. "Before you get yourself worked up, please try to have some patience..."

"YOU DARE GIVE ME ORDERS?! YOU ARE NOT MY BOSS!" Mr. 5 yelled.

"But I am," a female voice responded from the galley. All eyes turned on a dark-haired woman leading out a blonde-haired woman, an orange-haired young lady, and a short green girl. The second the green one stepped out, Steven's eyes lit up.

"IS THAT ANOTHER GEM?!"

"Is that girl green?" the long-nosed one asked curiously.

"Miss...Miss All Sunday! Miss Valentine!" Mr. 5 gulped as he acknowledged them. "Finally! People I know! What the hell is going on here?"

The green girl sighed and rubbed her head. "These clods were affected as well?"

"It appears so, Miss Peridot. It seems like I have to put my old code name back to use," Miss All Sunday frowned. "Mr. 5, stand down. You are merely suffering from an amnesiac episode...that all of you are seemingly sharing."

"That's preposterous! If I am suffering from amnesia, how do I remember who I am and what I was doing before today?" Miss Valentine retorted. "Is this a test from the boss?"

"All will be revealed in time...I suppose," Miss All Sunday replied. Then she looked around and counted the people present. "We are missing Mr. Swordsman and Mr. Doctor...we left Connie, Miss Painter, and Miss Amethyst asleep so that accounts for everybody."

"I believe the swordsman is asleep up there in the crow's nest," Garnet pointed up. "And our reindeer-doctor is pretending to hide over there in the tangerine trees."

"Tangerines?" the orange-haired girl asked quickly. "What tangerines?"

"I believe they are yours, Nami," Pearl pointed to them. "You seemed rather attached to them."

As everyone looked up, the form of a small reindeer could be seen. He was wearing a hat and appeared to be trying to hide, but was doing it backwards. "WHAT IS THAT?!" Luffy and the long-nosed pirate asked in unison.

"GAH! STAY BACK, HUMANS!" the reindeer-doctor shouted taking most of them back in shock.

"Did...did that reindeer just talk?" Mr. 5 asked. "Words fail me."

"Enough!" Garnet stamped her foot on the deck, getting everyone's

attention. "Listen up! I do not know what happened or even why it happened, but it seems as if you all suffered from selective amnesia!"

"What the hell does that mean?" Miss Valentine interrupted.

"Chocolate-woman, I will request this of you once: please do NOT interrupt me again," Garnet bluntly asked her. She walked up to her, showcasing her dominant height over her.

"How...how...how did you know about my chocolate?" she whimpered.

"Because we know you...all of us know each other to varying degrees," Garnet explained. "Now I might not know how this happened, but I used the term 'selective amnesia' because it seems like each of you remember your past to a certain point."

The crew started rumbling again but one look at Garnet stopped them all instantly. At that moment, the man with the curly eyebrows walked outside with a tray of toast, eggs, and freshly squeezed juice. "Now this is only a start, but I figured that...hello, nurse!"

The man rushed over to Miss All Sunday and the other ladies and bowed. "Am I dreaming this? Is this real life? Is this just fantasy?"

"*Caught in a landslide! No escape from reality!*" Greg chimed in from the corner, earning an angry glare from the chef. "What? I love 'Bohemian Rhapsody!'"

"What the hell is that?"

"...the Queen song you were just quoting...apparently unintentionally? Was that just...I...will just stay in my corner and not talk," Greg sighed and slumped down.

"'Queen?' No; it is impossible to pick only one! All of you are queens! Your beauty is...why do I feel like I've interrupted something?" he asked as he saw the pained look on Garnet's face.

"Chef Sanji, please stop flirting. I am trying to explain everything I know," Garnet stoically asked. The chef nodded, passed out the

small bit of food he prepared and the drinks while smoking a cigarette. Steven did not like the smoke at all.

"Shouldn't we wait for Connie and the painter?" Pearl asked.

"If my theory is right, Connie should be able to handle it. The same goes for Amethyst," Garnet shrugged. "Regardless, allow us to explain where you are and who you are. You are sailing the Grand Line on the Going Merry, a pirate ship captained by Pirate Captain Luffy there."

"I knew you weren't the captain," Sanji muttered in the direction of the long-nosed fellow.

"Grand Line?! We are on the Grand Line?!" Luffy clapped his hands joyfully.

"Did...did you say 'pirates?!'" Nami asked angrily.

"Yes, she did," Pearl replied. "You, Nami, are the navigator and occasional thief. Sanji, as one can guess, is the cook. Usopp," she pointed to the long-nosed pirate. "Is the marksman apparently. He is also the ship's liar."

"That I believe," Sanji chuckled.

"SHUT UP!" Usopp yelled.

"Chopper, the reindeer up there, is the doctor. Nico Robin, or Miss All Sunday as you two know her as, is the archaeologist. Up in the crow's nest is Zoro, your swordsman. There is one more of your number still sleeping: Genevieve, who is your painter. You two know her better as Miss Goldenweek."

Chopper, for the first time, came out from the tangerines and poked his head out from the railing down to the deck. "I'm...I'm a doctor? On a pirate ship?"

"You are, and better from any human doctors as far as I know. You even impressed Dr. Maheswaran with your medical talents," Robin smiled.

"Shut...shut your mouth, you human bastard! You can't impress me that easily!" Chopper said while blushing and dancing.

"Language!" Steven pointed up in shock.

"Okay, ladies. That might explain our roles...but that still leads to several questions. To start with, what about them? What about you?!" Usopp yelled.

"And why would I be a pirate? Don't you know I HATE pirates?!" Nami joined in.

"To answer the first set of questions, they are Damian and Petrea, formerly Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine of the Baroque Works organization," Pearl pointed to the two in question.

"You know my name?! Who even are you people?!" Petrea jumped back in shock.

"We are the Crystal Gems. I am Garnet and that is Pearl. Amethyst is the purple Gem sleeping in the ladies' quarters and Peridot is the green one who says 'clod.'"

"I'm the smart and sensible one!" Peridot folded her arms together and grinned. "Though I'm NOT a Crystal Gem!"

"You are so cute!" Steven whispered as he fixated on the green Gem. "I can't believe there are other Gems out there!"

"...why are you staring at me like that?" Peridot asked the half-Gem.

"Because you are adorable!"

"...you're named after rocks? Really?" Nami frowned, ignoring Steven's fawning over Peridot.

"Technically we..." Peridot started before getting cut off.

"Not now, Peridot! That will just confuse them! Rounding us out is Steven, the boy over there talking to Peridot. The man keeping to himself is his father, Greg, and the other girl just stirring in the other room is his friend, Connie."

"Wait, Connie is here?!" Steven stopped what he was doing and became incredibly excited. He was doing a good job following along with everything Garnet was saying, but now he knew Connie was on the ship with him. He had only spent a small amount of time with her, but he enjoyed every second of it. "I want to go find her!"

"Settle down, Steven. She will be here before you know it," Pearl advised him. "It is more important that you pay attention."

"...okay..."

"Now, Steven here is the crew's temporary musician," Pearl explained to the group. "In a similar capacity, Petrea and Damian are not technically part of the pirate crew, but they are close enough. Petrea is a chocolatier and Damian is a fireman..."

"I...I never told anybody that..." Damian whispered. "You knew I dreamed of being a fireman?"

"Your dream is to be a *fireman*? Why has that never come up the entire time we have been partners?" Petrea asked, seemingly taken back and hurt.

"I haven't thought about it...REALLY thought about it...in years," he put his hand on the side of the ship for support. "This is starting to freak me out."

"The only one who is going to freak out is me!" Nami shouted. "I don't care about your roles and I don't care about your dreams! Pirates are the worst of the worst! I loathe being in your presence and the fact that you would have the audacity to tell me I would give up my convictions to join you is ridiculous!"

"I'm with the beautiful lady. Why would I have given up my job at the Baratie?" Sanji pointed out.

"And why would I abandon Kaya? That poor girl needs my stories to get her through her stifling days!" Usopp began to panic. "She needs me!"

The Gems exchanged glances and adopted worrying looks on their faces. "I...I honestly have no idea," Pearl shook her head. "You all

only told Steven these things and we never asked...but what I CAN do is show you that you all were happy together!"

Pearl touched her hands to her forehead, causing her to project an image on the middle of the deck. The pirates were all very surprised at the sight and started to back away in fear. However, they stopped when the image began to take shape. To Steven's surprise, it was a plethora of videos of him playing around with these people. Everyone seemed so happy and sure of themselves, unlike now where everyone was reserved and distrusting.

"How...how are you doing that?!" Luffy asked excitedly.

"I can use my gem to project images from the past in a holographic manner. These images and clips are all taken from when you were stuck in Beach City for several days."

"Beach City?' Really? You couldn't think of a better fake name?" Nami grumbled. "What is to say you didn't create that with whatever Devil Fruit powers you have?"

"The only ones where who have eaten a Devil Fruit are him, him, her, her, him and him," Garnet pointed to Luffy, Damian, Nico Robin, Petrea, Chopper and Greg. Chopper, upon being acknowledged, tried to hide himself again in the tangerine trees. Greg, on the other hand, looked like a deer in the headlights.

"Look, I know you guys don't think highly of me or want me around, but I don't like you calling me the devil in front of Steven!" Greg finally got out.

"Devil Fruit,' Greg," Pearl corrected him. "You have the ability to create music out of thin air."

"...what?"

The Gem groaned and emulated an awkward air guitar. "Try this, Greg. Pretend to play your instrument and go from there."

Steven watched his dad look down, shrug, and began to play his air guitar. To his shock (and Steven's), music actually rang out. "HOW DID I DO THAT?!"

"You ate a Devil Fruit. May we please move on?" Pearl tapped the side of her cheek. "I swear this is becoming tedious."

"But...but I have so many questions!"

"Greg, I actually have a question for you," Pearl interjected. "Tell me, how old are you?"

"...forty-one years old? Why does that matter?"

"Are you exactly forty-one years old?"

"There are, like, maybe four months left until my birthday if you want to be specific."

Garnet began to count on her fingers and nodded. "That confirms it. He lost forty-five months of memory."

"And if Steven lost fourteen months of memory, that means..." Pearl began before getting cut off.

"...this is ridiculous!" Nami stamped her foot and began to walk away. "You weird people aren't making sense and frankly, I don't care! I shouldn't be on the Grand Line; I should be in Cocoyashi Village with Nojiko and Genzo!"

"Who?" Pearl asked, inciting Nami even more.

"You don't even know who they are yet you claim to know me. What a heap of lies," she spat out.

"To be fair, I tried getting you to tell me your life story yesterday but you wouldn't oblige!" Peridot retorted. "I will be the first to admit I do not know the first thing about ANY of you or even this world. But I can guarantee with the utmost certainty that you belong here, Miss Navigator!"

"Nami, I know who your sister is and I know those tangerines were your mother's. I don't have all the details since I am the newest member of the crew, but I know that you dislike pirates due to the Fishman Pirates I believe," Robin elaborated. "If you don't believe that you belong here, check your log. It is in the bedroom. You have

to excuse the Gems for not knowing these things. They are...not from around here. They have only known us for a limited time, but in that time they have changed several people's lives, including my own."

Nami stopped to consider Robin's words. "Fine. I'll check the log...but it doesn't mean that I believe any of this. There are too many holes in your story and all of it seems way too coincidental for my liking!"

As she opened the door to enter the ladies' quarters, she was met by two people: a young girl with rosy cheeks and Connie. Seeing the girl made Steven's heart light. "Guys, something weird happened with Genevieve and...oh! Hi, Nami!"

"Connie! I'm so happy to see you!" Steven ran over and gave her a hug. "Wait, what happened to your glasses?"

Connie accepted the hug, frowned, and looked to the Gems. "Amnesia?"

"Amnesia," Garnet nodded. "And this just confirmed the last part of my theory."

"What theory? Who else has amnesia?" Connie asked worryingly. She looked at the faces on everyone and could see that Nami was angry yet startled and the "Mr. 5 Pair" was shocked to see this young girl apparently named Genevieve. "It's everyone but us, isn't it?"

"Right in one."

"Oh come on! That is just like that *Under the Knife* episode that was used as a way to get new viewers caught up on ten years of continuity! I hate that episode," Connie groaned before widening her eyes. "Wait, why are we the only ones who have perfect memory?"

"The tall, scary lady was about to tell us," Usopp pointed to her.

"Heh. 'Scary,'" Garnet let out a single chuckle. "Now then, since I do not know any of your ages or the events in your life that would correlate to the appropriate times, I am basing this entirely around

Steven and Greg."

"Me?" Steven asked. He looked over to his father, who was staring at his fingers like he did when he had a dozen donuts from the Big Donut.

"...this is too cool," Greg said to himself before realizing he was being talked to. "What? Oh, sorry. I'm not used to you guys actually needing me for this kind of stuff."

"Exactly," Garnet folded her arms. "That is because three years ago you weren't as involved with our affairs as you have been recently."

"What?"

"Greg, how do we put this delicately? You are actually forty-five years old," Pearl revealed. "Steven, you just turned fourteen last night."

The Universe boys just stood there and processed the information Pearl told them. "I'm...I'm fourteen?!"

"I'M FORTY-FIVE?!" Greg panicked. "HOW DID I LOSE ALMOST FOUR YEARS OF MY LIFE?!"

"It began last night after your birthday party. Garnet, Peridot, Robin, Connie and yours truly were up later than everyone else. We overheard a strange noise which we dismissed as wind, but seeing how Robin and Connie still retain their memories, it stands to reason that your memory loss and that noise are interconnected."

"The last thing Steven remembers occurred fourteen months ago," Pearl continued. "Which is, as I just mentioned, his current age. The same can be said for Greg, who lost almost four years of memories."

"Basically, our theory is that everyone who was asleep last night when that sound played lost a month's worth of memories for every year they have been alive," Garnet summed it up.

"Why didn't you include you, Garnet, or Peridot in that?" Sanji asked curiously. "You were up too, right?"

"Very true, but we are Gems, not half-Gems like Steven. It is doubtful that anything in your dimension could affect us like that," Pearl scoffed.

"...did you say 'dimension?'" Nami asked sharply, still unhappy with her current situation. "What does that mean?"

"Duh! We come from a parallel dimension accessible through alien technology unique to our Homeworld! Nyehehehehe!" Peridot laughed. "Even more than that, we Gems are aliens that are literally sentient rocks with the bodies you see before you being mere projections from our gemstones! That is why our names are derived from rocks!"

There was silence on the deck and tangerine grove. Pearl and Garnet slapped their face in frustration as every other person besides Connie and Robin began to yell and scream at the same time. "...I think you should have eased them into that one, Peridot," Connie sighed.

"How was I supposed to know?! This is all new to me too!" Peridot defended herself.

As the various people were yelling at Garnet and Pearl, another figure stirred. Steven, who had desperately wished for the fighting to stop so they could work together to fix their memories, saw movement up in the crow's nest. "Uh...guys..."

"Oy!" a man called out angrily. "I was sleeping up here! And...wait, how did I get up here?"

"It seems Zoro is finally up," Garnet commented.

"Zoro? As in the famous PIRATE HUNTER?!" Damian jumped back. "WHY THE HELL IS A PIRATE HUNTER ON A PIRATE SHIP?!"

"He's the swordsman," Pearl reminded him. "I fail to see..."

"A pirate ship? This just got interesting," the man said as he jumped down to the deck. He had green hair and gold earrings. Steven thought he looked cool but scary at the same time. "Mind telling me

why I'm here and what you all are yelling about? It's too early for this shit."

"GAH! SCARY HUMAN!" Chopper shouted, returning to his hiding spot.

"...okay, what the hell was that?" Zoro asked while still keeping a serious expression on his face.

"A reindeer-doctor apparently," Sanji shrugged. "Though all I see is an emergency food supply."

"No eating Chopper!" Garnet glared at him.

"Yeesh! Beautiful as hell, but can't take a joke..." Sanji sighed. "So, why is a pirate hunter a part of a pirate crew?"

"That is the last question we should be asking!" Nami yelled.

"First of all, I never took the name 'pirate hunter' for myself. I only bounty hunt for food money and to live. I take no joy in it. Secondly, did you say that I am a part of a pirate crew? When did that happen? You guys have five minutes to explain before I leave," Zoro threatened.

"Apparently we all lost our memories, Mr. Cool Sword-Guy!" Steven explained. "The Gems think that we lost a month's worth of memories for every year we were alive!"

"Which I still can't wrap my brain around because Steven looks exactly the same from my memories as he does now!" Greg pointed out. "Wouldn't he have grown in that time?"

With that, the Gems lost control of the crew as they all began to speak out at once. As this was going on, Connie blushed and began to think back to the previous night. This was becoming a certified disaster. They were accomplishing nothing and because of their panic, they kept talking in circles. It was easier to talk to Genevieve because they did so between just the two of them. She needed to think of a plan and she needed to think it up quickly if this day was going to be salvaged. She owed it to her friends.

"Wait! Genevieve...I think I have an idea! I..." Connie started to say through the ruckus before she was interrupted by the door opening up. Connie turned around to see Amethyst yawning and stretching. "Amethyst! You're finally awake!"

"Somebody took her time!" Pearl made her way to the purple Gem. "While you have been sleeping, the ship has fallen to madness!"

"...why is that woman purple?" Zoro asked.

"Amethyst! Wow! You look so pretty in your dress!" Steven joined Pearl and went to hug the Gem.

She backed away and ruffled Steven's hair. "Woah, little dude. I don't even know where you have been! I...wow! There is a lot of humans here. Rose is gonna love this!"

"...did...did you just say 'Rose?'" Pearl whispered.

"Duh. You know, the tall pink Gem? You can't miss her. Where is she? I didn't see her in there?"

Pearl practically fainted to the ground and Garnet went to grab her. Steven could only stare at Amethyst with shock. "You don't know who I am?"

"Well, I know you have a sweet shirt," Amethyst admitted. "Should I know you, little man?"

In that moment, any doubt that Steven had about memory loss vanished right before his eyes. However, Garnet had only gotten it half-right. It did seem like the length of time missing was affected by their ages, but she was wrong on one critical detail:

Gems could lose their memory too. Amethyst had lost four hundred and sixteen years of memories in a single night...including any memory of Steven or of Rose's passing.

The Harsh Reality

Connie was certain that she was about to lose control of the situation. It was one thing to help the others realize that they were all friends and part of a pirate crew together, but Amethyst was a different story. If Garnet's theory was correct, Connie did not even need to do the math to know how many years of memories Amethyst lost. She knew that she lost the memories that mattered the most:

The memories of Steven's life and Rose's passing.

The Gem still believed that Rose Quartz, Steven's mother, was still alive. She had no memories of meeting Greg Universe or probably any of the other denizens of Beach City. She knew nothing about her current surroundings. She knew nothing of the young, innocent boy staring sorrowfully at her. All she knew was a shadow of a former life...a shadow that would have to be illuminated. This meant that somebody had to do the unthinkable:

They needed to tell Amethyst that Rose was dead.

Connie knew from conversations in the past that Amethyst had a deep connection to Rose. True, all of the Gems did, but Amethyst had a different type of connection. Garnet saw Rose as a teacher and confidant. She was someone who could help her understand her life as a true fusion. Pearl saw Rose as...well, Connie had her ideas and chose not to pursue them as the implications freaked her out a bit. But Amethyst was different from the other Gems. She wasn't from Homeworld like the others; she was made on Earth in one of those Kindergarten things. Rose saved her from that place and gave her a home and a purpose. Rose was like a mother figure to her, and to reveal what happened to Rose would be the equivalent of Connie's mother telling a young child that they lost their mother in a surgery.

On the other hand, there was poor Steven. Her best friend had gone through a lot of rough situations in the time that Connie knew him, but this was a new one for him. It was bad enough that he had to

cope with the fact that he was away from home without over a year's worth of memories, but this? This situation would crush his soul potentially beyond repair. One of the four parental figures in his life did not know that he existed. He did not have to have his memories to understand that.

The real question is how Amethyst would react to Steven once she learned the truth.

Steven once confided in her that he sometimes believed that the Gems secretly resented Steven's existence because of the implications of his birth. Steven was only alive because Rose Quartz chose to end her life for him to exist. However, they would never actually outright blame him due to all of the years of love and compassion the four of them shared. Connie suspected that they instead fixated their emotions onto Greg, which is why he was left out of the loop for so long.

But Amethyst did not have those years of love anymore. She had no filter of joy to hide her remorse for Rose. And Steven...Steven did not even remember his mother's words of strength or his own suspicions about the Gems' true feelings on the matter. That was the real reason why Connie felt worried beyond belief:

Steven was about to become blindsided with emotions that he would probably not be able to handle.

"Seriously, did I pass her or something? I don't even know how I got here, but it's kind of cozy," Amethyst laughed to herself. "I've got to show her this kicking hair I woke up with!"

The other Crystal Gems did their best to compose themselves while Peridot stared intently at Amethyst. "Fascinating! A Gem that is affected by the same dream affliction! Could this be due to your creation in the Kindergarten as opposed to Homeworld?"

"Woah! Back up! One: you don't get to talk about that!" Amethyst said defensively. "Two: are you another Gem? I thought we were the only ones left that weren't Corrupted!"

"It's...complicated?" Peridot shrugged. "I suppose you may call me

Peridot."

"Ha! I'm gonna call you 'Perry!' That's great! Does Rose know about you?"

"Okay, you shitty rock people, this is ridiculous! Stop leaving us out of the loop and tell us who the hell this 'Rose' is!" Sanji growled.

Amethyst frowned and looked around again. "You guys don't know Rose Quartz? You know, the eight-foot tall, pink-haired Gem? Likes to wear a big white dress?"

"I think we would have seen her," the chef grumbled. "Look, all I want to do is get back to work. Can we figure this mess out so I can go on with my life?"

Steven took a deep breath and grabbed Amethyst's hand. The purple Gem tried to pull away, but Steven continued to hold on with everything he had. "Amethyst, please look at me. I mean, really look at me."

"Uh...okay?" she reluctantly agreed to it. "Am I supposed to be seeing something?"

"Me! Steven Universe! Please tell me that you recognize me! Please!" Steven pleaded with tears in his eyes.

She continued to stare at him before turning to Pearl, who was trying to compose herself. "Do you guys have any idea what this is about?"

"Amethyst..." Pearl took several seconds to find her voice. "What is the last thing you remember?"

She cocked her head and thought about it. "Uh, we were at the Trans-Carpathian Ruins in Sierra Gordo looking for the Creation Matrix. Why? What are you guys not telling me?"

"Two minutes," Zoro muttered to himself, keeping track of his promised five minutes.

"Rose...Rose is..." Pearl couldn't bring herself to say it.

"Rose is what?! Tell me already! I'm dying with anticipation here!"

"Rose Quartz is...not here Amethyst," Pearl finally got it out.

"WHO THE HELL IS ROSE QUARTZ?!" Damian shouted. "What the hell is even going on here?! I get that we lost our memories or some crap, but what in the ever-loving hell is happening?!"

"Rose Quartz was the leader of the Crystal Gems. She was the greatest and most perfect Gem I have ever had the privilege of knowing," Pearl whispered, wiping away her own tears. "She was the one who led the rebellion against Homeworld and she was the one who made it her life's mission to protect the Earth and all of its inhabitants."

"Rebellion?" Steven picked up on it.

"Was?" Amethyst did the same. "Guys, what aren't you telling me?!"

"The Gem known as Rose Quartz..." Peridot began.

"Don't do it, Peridot!" Garnet warned, but the warning fell on deaf ears.

"...gave up her life-essence some time ago," Peridot finished her explanation, receiving appalled looks from Pearl and Garnet. "She is no longer with us in the physical sense, Amethyst. See? Was that so hard to say?"

"...okay, now I'm intrigued," Zoro said to himself, stepping back as the action unfolded.

"PERIDOT!" Garnet yelled angrily.

"What?! I told her the truth of the matter! Now we can move on and pool our resources on finding a way to return their memories back so we can return back to the barn or whatever else it is that we are doing in this dimension!"

"...what?" Amethyst whispered to herself. "What did you say?"

"It is not that, Peridot," Garnet grabbed her. "You need to realize the gravity of the situation! Rose might have given up her physical form years ago to us, but Amethyst just lost those years! She remembers Rose like she was here yesterday because for her, she was! You need to comprehend exactly what you did to Amethyst!"

"I wasn't trying to cause harm to Amethyst! I...I thought I was furthering the mission!"

"This isn't a mission right now! This is about Amethyst's feelings! Her life isn't something that can be checked off of a list!"

Peridot opened her mouth to defend herself but found that she had no words that could adequately describe her feelings about the situation. She saw that Amethyst, the closest Crystal Gem that she could call her friend, was seemingly in a state of shock and panic. Her eyes were darting around as she tried to get a grasp on the situation. It was clear that she was close to having a nervous breakdown.

"Rose...is dead?" Amethyst asked weakly. "No. No. That can't be right! What happened?!"

"It...it is complicated," Pearl said nervously.

"Who killed her?! Was it Homeworld?!"

"Amethyst, you need to calm down and listen," Garnet tried to keep the peace.

"How can you ask me to keep calm?! Rose has been murdered!" Amethyst collapsed to the ground and started to cry her eyes out. She clenched her hands into a fist and started to punch the deck, causing it to crack.

"She's going to destroy the ship if she keeps this up!" Usopp pointed out worriedly.

"Amethyst, please stop!" Steven begged, trying to grab her. In her anguish, she knocked Steven back, prompting Garnet to catch him.

"AMETHYST!" Garnet yelled, placing Steven down and grabbing

Amethyst in his place. "I know this is hard for you to listen to, but Rose wouldn't want you to throw her son around like a ragdoll!"

The comment caused the Gem to stop and catch her breath. It was clear that she was replaying the message in her head a few times. As this was happening, the pirates with memory loss watched the scene unfold in both horror and confusion. The sight of a hysterical purple rage woman was enough to have them keep their distance, with the exception of Sanji and Zoro who were unafraid yet bewildered. Without the proper context, this was literally a sight out of a horror novel.

"Her...what? Rose had a son? But...when? How?" Amethyst asked in confusion. She looked at Steven and widened her eyes. "But...but he's a human! Can we even do that?"

"Rose gave up her physical form to bring Steven into the world," Garnet explained tenderly "She passed on her gem to him. See for yourself."

With that, Steven lifted up his shirt, revealing the shining pink gemstone in his stomach. Amethyst stared at it for a moment, unable to find her voice. She touched it and then recoiled her hand as if the touch was burning her.

"Rose gave herself up...for him? I...I don't understand!"

"Steven is the embodiment of the unconditional love shared by Rose Quartz and a human named Greg Universe," Garnet motioned for Greg to move forward. The man was hesitant to do so, but he reluctantly complied. "You know Rose, Amethyst. I know you know what she placed above all else."

"Humanity," Amethyst whispered and she shook her head. "I get that...but him?! What makes this one so special?! She wasn't like that with that Hauser-guy or Abernathy or even Faireborn! She was crazy about Faireborn! He's not even that good looking!"

"Hey! I was good looking enough for you to emulate my hair!" Greg defended himself before finding himself sighing. "Amethyst, I know this is hard to believe and accept, but I'm your friend...well, I was

and then we drifted apart except to see Steven...but we can still be friends like before! You were like my plucky little sister for a bit there!"

"Sister?" Amethyst repeated ruefully. "Why would I like the person who killed Rose Quartz, let alone think of him like a brother?!"

"Amethyst, this isn't you..." Pearl interjected. "Yes, Greg has his many, many flaws, but he is speaking the harsh truth."

"Isn't me? 'ISN'T ME?!'" Amethyst yelled. "The only one who isn't acting like themselves is YOU, Pearl! How can you be accepting of this?! You loved Rose with every fiber of your existence!"

"I...that is to say..." Pearl was caught off-guard. "Of course I did... but she is now a part of Steven and we need to accept that..."

"No! I ACCEPT that I went to bed and Rose was still alive! I DO NOT accept that Rose gave up her life all for some STUPID HUMAN KID!" Amethyst screamed. In an instant, her gemstone glowed brightly and she turned herself into an owl. "DON'T FOLLOW ME!"

The owl took flight out into the sea and toward a small object in the distance. Connie surmised that it was another island on the Grand Line, but she had no time to think beyond that. She had other things to concern herself with:

"Steven!" Connie cried out as she ran over and put her arms around her friend. The half-Gem had a blank look on his face as he just sat there watching Amethyst fly away. The Gems had crowded around Steven as well, with Greg running in as well. Luffy tried to run over, but Garnet motioned for him to stay where he was. "Steven, she doesn't know what she is saying!"

"She said I was stupid," Steven muttered to himself.

"Steven, listen to me," Garnet tried to have him look at her in the face. "When Amethyst was young, she often had temper tantrums...terrible temper tantrums. Connie is right: she does not comprehend the gravity of her words. I know it is asking so much of you, but please don't read too hard into what she said."

"That's right, Steven. We all love you unconditionally," Pearl told him. "That includes Amethyst. You pay her no mind! We will get this all sorted out before you know it!"

"Do..." Steven finally said. "Do you think that if she gets to know me when she calms down...that she will like me again?"

"Steven!" the two Gems and Connie said at once as tears flowed from their eyes.

On the side of Garnet, Peridot examined the situation and wiped away a few tears that formed in her own eyes. She raised her hand to try to talk, but put it down as she looked at the forced blank stare that Steven was giving off. She did not have to know much about human emotions to know that he was doing his best to hide his true feelings or, at worst, had yet to comprehend what was happening around him.

"I caused this," Peridot whispered to herself. She walked past the Straw Hats and slumped down on the side of the railing, lost in thought.

"Does anyone feel like we really don't belong here?" Damian asked, speaking for everyone. "Seriously, I can handle a lot, but I feel like we have lost track of the original question here."

"Shut up, Mr. 5!" Petrea stepped on his foot. The woman had tears of her own in her eyes, though she tried to hide them. "His problems seem to be worse than ours at the present moment...all of ours! We can explain to the boss later why we are late..."

"I hate to admit it, but the criminal is right," Nami sighed, red eyes revealing that she too was moved by the sight. "This boy...Steven, right? I can't just leave like this. I may hate each and every one of you solely for being pirates, but this kid seems too innocent to be mad at."

"I'll stay too," Zoro sighed and scratched his head. "Something about leaving seems wrong. I might not have any actual reason to stay besides seeing how this plays out, but I can't just leave after seeing a raging purple woman turn into an owl."

"She made my friend cry!" Luffy punched his hand. "I'm gonna kick her ass!"

"Were you paying attention to anything?! She was, like, his aunt or something!" Usopp berated him. "How would you feel if your family had no idea who you were and insulted you just for the crime of being born?!"

"I...I didn't think of it like that," Luffy frowned and moped. He looked over to Steven and the Gems and started to shout, causing everyone to jump. "Alright! I'm the captain of this ship, right? Well, as your captain, I say we follow that owl this second for my friend Steven!"

"You're not my captain..." Nami bit her lip as she tried to keep herself calm.

Garnet, the first one to stand up from the group hug, nodded and flashed Luffy a thumbs up. "An excellent suggestion, Pirate Captain Luffy."

"I agree...for once," Pearl smiled. "What do you think, Steven? Shall we go show Amethyst how much of a charmer you can be?"

The boy, still seemingly locked in his own head despite trying to play it off otherwise, moved his head slightly. "I was born ready," he said lightly.

Connie, picking up on this, quickly thought to herself how to best remedy the situation. She often remembered how her mother would say the best way to administer medicine that was too hard to handle was through a distraction, so she started with that. Finally, the girl snapped her fingers. "I've got it!"

"What do you have...kid? I'm sorry, but I forgot your name," Greg asked, blushing and seemingly trying not to get overwhelmed by the situation as well. Connie forgot to take into consideration Greg's feelings about Amethyst's actions. She had said incredibly harsh things about him too and, more importantly, reminded the former rock star about his deceased wife.

"Connie, Mr. Universe. Connie Maheswaran. But I know what we can do to kill the time before we hit that island where Amethyst flew off towards!" Connie said excitedly.

"...you don't mean singing, do you?" Pearl asked. "I know that is what Steven would say in these situations, but I don't think it is an appropriate time for that."

"No! Each of you has forgotten your memories, right? And Robin doesn't know enough about your adventures to give you the full story? Well, they say a picture tells a million stories at the same time!"

"...what are you getting at, little girl?" Sanji asked.

"We have a painter on this ship!" Connie pointed to Genevieve, who looked from side to side before pointing at herself. "Yes! I mean you, Genevieve! You painted so many things during your time with the Straw Hats and Steven before we entered the picture and I can bet my bottom dollar that you painted things after we parted ways too!"

"Connie, I am sorry to tell you, but we tried showing them images from my gem and it didn't do anything at all to jot their memories," Pearl explained. "What good will the painter's paintings be if my own projections couldn't do the trick?"

"I'd trust a painting more than a projected image coming out from a living rock," Nami folded her arms. "A painting is something that would take more time and effort to vandalize to an effective degree. You could have easily tampered with your own memories. Besides, you made it clear that any of you barely took the time to know anything about us."

"That's not true!" Connie quickly chimed in. "Your name is Nami. Your adopted sister is Nojiko and you come from Cocoyashi Village. The tattoo on your arm used to be the sign of the Arlong Pirates but you changed it after Luffy stopped him to honor your mother and an old friend...Gonzo? No, that's a Muppet..."

"My tattoo?" Nami quickly said, looking down at her arm. Sure enough, there was the tangerine and pinwheel design that Connie

was alluding to. "When did this happen?!"

"Before you left the East Blue...right after Sanji joined up if I have my facts straight. I talked to each of you when we stayed in the princess' palace to try to get to know you and I got to learn some of your pasts, and you were one of the ones who gladly told me!"

Connie began to pace around excitedly, taking Nami's shocked face as a good sign. "Who else could use convincing that talked to me? Damian; you wanted to be a fireman more than anything after a terrible accident with a book of matches! You put those dreams aside when you ate the Bomb-Bomb Fruit, thinking that you could never achieve your dreams with such destructive power. Instead, you joined up with Baroque Works before defecting with Petrea and Genevieve to the Straw Hats!"

The bomb-man just let his jaw hit the floor as he realized what the girl was saying. "Defected...the matches...how...how did you know that?!"

"You told us that one right after you decided to live in Beach City as their fireman! And you joined him, Petrea! You started up a chocolate shop on the boardwalk. You named it Miss Valentine's after your old code name!" Connie continued with a passion. "Look, the Gems might not have had the time to talk to all of you, but somebody from our dimension did: Steven! Guess what? Steven tells me everything and I am naturally a curious girl! Beyond that, I made it a point to learn as much about you all as I could during the time we had together in Vivi's palace and in Beach City! You guys told Steven some things and I asked you the rest!"

"You mean the princess of the Alabasta Kingdom?" Petrea asked. "That is the kingdom the boss wants to take over..."

"'Wanted.' Past tense. Baroque Works is finished, Miss Valentine," Robin joined in, deciding to stand with Connie. "You all brought it down together as a crew...as a surrogate family."

"Family..." Steven whispered.

"Discounting Miss Peridot, I have been with you all for the shortest amount of time, but if any of us were to know you, it would be this

young woman right here. She might not be as...empathetic and enthusiastic as young Steven usually is, but she earned a rather close silver medal. Give her a chance. What is the worst that would happen?"

There was prolonged silence as the Straw Hats thought about it. Finally, it was Nami who spoke first as she rubbed her tattoo. "Let's find the paintings...I want to see this for myself."

"As you should, Miss Navigator. I can show you where our former Miss Goldenweek kept her art gallery," Robin offered. "Are there any objections?"

"Not from me!" Luffy cheered.

"As I figured," Robin chuckled. "Anyone else?"

When nobody spoke, including the soft-spoken Chopper, Robin smiled. "Then follow me. It is in what was formerly the anchor storage deck. While it still serves its apparent initial function, Miss Painter was given free rein to decorate it with her finished artwork. Needless to say, much of our main storage room is now full from having to accommodate our young painter's ever-growing collection of art."

Making their way to the other side of the ship, Steven was keeping to himself. Connie had tried to bring him to the front with her, but Garnet had shaken her head. She took it as Garnet wanting to give Steven a bit of space for the present moment. Instead, he walked with Peridot, who seemed to be struggling with something. Connie presumed that she desperately wanted to apologize for what Amethyst had done, but could not word it correctly. Finally, they reached the door underneath the giant sheep figurehead. Cracking a smile, Connie hoped that a small joke might lighten the mood. She walked up and played around with the doorknob. "Ninety-nine... forty-four...one hundred percent pure!"

"...what kind of a combination is that?" Zoro asked, bewildered and bored. "Is there even a lock on the door?"

"Either they have Ivory soap in this dimension or that was a *Willy*

Wonka reference," Greg shrugged.

"Good try, Connie, but it might be better to just show them the paintings at this point," Pearl smiled.

The young girl sighed and nodded, realizing that trying to cheer Steven up like that would do more harm to the others than good. As such, she opened the door and allowed for everyone to try to fit into the room. Though it was a bit tight, the crew let out a collective gasp. "Ladies and gentlemen: the painting room."

Spread out in the room were scores of canvases all filled with vibrant colors and beautiful shapes. Some contained abstract images, but several depicted the various people and Gems in the room. There were paintings of snow covered mountains with Usopp, Luffy, and Steven starting to build snowmen, Sanji serving a very big table full of familiar faces, Connie dueling Zoro and the Marine Tashigi, Lion basking in the sun, and so much more.

"I want to paint these," Genevieve whispered in awe.

"You did, Genevieve!" Connie laughed.

"Oh...I want to paint a painting of the paintings then..."

"You made this?" Pearl asked, looking at a detailed recreation of her own room. Connie noticed that it had a small picture pinned to it: one of the photos that Connie made for her before she officially joined Luffy's crew. "It is a near-perfect recreation!"

"You...little girl, explain this painting to me!" Zoro demanded to Connie. His face had lost all color and Connie knew why.

"You and I had a duel before you returned to the Grand Line...but that's not what is bothering you, is it? You want to know who she is."

"I do...and it better be a good explanation!"

"That is Tashigi. She was a Marine who happened to be on this ship when it got sent to Beach City. You and her have a rivalry with each other. She wants one of your swords and hates you for possessing it. You hate her because she looks exactly like..."

"Don't say it," Zoro continued to stare intently at the picture. "I get the picture."

Damian snorted to himself, but tried to play it off. "Sorry...I've got a thing for puns..."

"So, all of these are things we did as a pirate crew?" Chopper asked. "Even the pink snow?"

"Steven said that it had something to do with honoring your old mentor's last wishes," Connie smiled gently. "You guys shared in some wonderful adventures together. But this doesn't have to be the end of them...if you don't want it to be."

"Well, I don't!" Luffy grinned as he looked at a painting of himself punching what appeared to be Peridot, much to her discomfort. "This is everything I have ever wanted and more in my life!"

"Me too," Usopp nodded. "Look at this! I'm clearly a brave warrior of the sea at last!"

"...I...I want to be a part of this too!" Chopper added. "Everything just...just feels right for some reason!"

One by one, the Straw Hats reiterated the same thing. Though it was clear that a few of them still had misgivings about the situation, the paintings and Connie's insight were winning them over enough to see how things could play out. "Connie, I think you are doing it," Garnet squeezed her shoulder. "This was a wonderful idea."

"I'm glad," the girl blushed, happy to see that everyone was starting to get back on track despite the terrible situation. "Isn't this exciting, Steven? I...Steven?"

As the girl turned around, she noticed that Steven was gone. The youth had apparently taken the opportunity of being stuck in a confined space to leave without being seen. The situation made Connie frown and she decided that if anyone were going to talk to him, it would be her. "I'll be right back."

"We'll hold down the fort," Garnet nodded. "I think that now is the perfect time for the two of you to talk alone."

Connie appreciated the amount of trust Garnet was apparently placing in her. She did not know if it was because of her confusing, yet helpful, Future Vision or if she truly believed that Steven would only respond to her. Either way, Connie was determined to be Steven's rock during this hard time.

She started to look around the ship for him, but couldn't find him anywhere. Finally, she climbed down into the men's quarters and found Steven curled up in his caterpillar sleeping bag. He looked so distant and hurt that it began to frighten Connie. The closest he ever came to acting like this was after Peridot and Jasper came to Earth, but even then he finally cracked after actually sitting down and talking to her in person.

"Steven? Are you okay?" Connie asked despite knowing the answer.

"I don't know," Steven grunted. "I don't think I'll ever know."

"Do...do you mind if I sit down with you? I'll leave if you want me to go."

"Please go," Steven curled up even harder in his sleeping bag. "I need to be alone."

Connie had hoped that this wouldn't be his response, but she guessed that it might be. "Alright, if that's what you want. I'll be upstairs if you need anything. We are almost at that island...maybe another thirty minutes or so to go. I just...just wanted you to know."

With that, she started the climb back up to the deck before Steven yelled to her. "No! I was wrong! Don't go! Please don't go!"

Relieved that she wasn't getting shut out, Connie rushed down and to Steven's side. At long last, the boy was starting to open up. "I'm right here, Steven! I'll always be here if you need me!"

"Connie, I don't know what to do!" Steven started to tear up again. "I feel like my whole life is crashing down before my eyes!"

"Well, why don't you tell me about it? I'm a very good listener."

"It's just...I know that Amethyst deep down really loves me and I get

that everything will probably go back to normal when our memories come back...but if Amethyst has so much hate for me right now..." Steven started to say before utterly breaking down in tears. "Did...did the Gems hate me because I was born too? Did they think that I was a stupid kid?"

Instantly, Connie pulled Steven close to her and let him cry on her shoulder. She patted his back and held him close. "Steven, you can't think like that. All that matters is the Gems love you for who you really are."

"But is that who I am? Am I just a stupid kid who hurt my family because I'm not my mom?" Steven wailed even harder.

"Not in a million years, Steven Universe...not to me at least. I told you once that I wanted to be a part of your universe, and I still mean it. You are not stupid and your family loves you no matter how you were born," Connie said gently.

"But...but how can you know for sure?" Steven wiped his eyes to stare at her.

"Because you are Steven Universe! How could someone not love you?"

Steven began to hug her more than before and in that moment, Connie realized that all of her worrying about Steven's aging process was all for nothing. Steven was Steven no matter what...and Connie was happy to be there for him.

After all, they were jam buds for life.

The Internalization of Amethyst

This is how it feels to be Amethyst in this moment:

You barely hear Pearl and Garnet try to calm you down as you internalize the crashing realization that your leader is dead.

You stare at the human male whom Rose apparently loved and wish that he was dead in her place.

You ignore the pleading youth trying to get your attention, for how can you acknowledge the walking reason for Rose's death with anything but anger despite him being her son? Staring at him just reminds you of one thing:

Rose is dead.

Finally, you snap and realize that this is not a conducive environment for you to be in. The entire situation is proving to be way too much to handle, even for a strong Gem like yourself. You cannot accept that Rose is gone and really, why should you? Rose was alive the day before and it was inconceivable that she would die in such little time. There was no way that you lost your memories like Pearl was taunting you with. Why would you be affected and not Pearl or Garnet...

Then you realize that you are making excuses in your head. Garnet or Pearl would never joke like this about Rose. It was true.

Rose is dead.

Suddenly, it becomes hard to breathe when Pearl tries to justify the boy's existence, which you do not question despite the fact that Gems do not need to breathe. It is too much to handle and you realize what you need to do in order to make peace with the situation:

"No, I ACCEPT that I went to bed and Rose was still alive! I DO NOT accept that Rose gave up her life for some STUPID HUMAN KID!" you yell at the crowd of people, both familiar and unfamiliar.

You ignore the horrified expressions on their faces as you change your appearance into that of an owl. "DON'T FOLLOW ME!" You begin to take flight to a nearby island and do your best not to cry more than what you have done. Of course, you know that it is impossible to do so.

Rose is dead.

Upon reaching the island, you scan around for a good place to hide and reevaluate the situation. Thankfully, you stumble upon what appears to be a rundown ghost town rather fast. You transform back into your humanoid form and take a seat near a fountain. Splashing some water on yourself, you stare at your reflection and are momentarily distracted by your face. You cannot believe how different you look...how mature you have gotten overnight. But then that pride disappears as you are reminded once more of the unspeakable truth:

Rose is dead.

You take a deep sigh and cry to yourself some more while you play through all of the pieces again in your head. Somehow, you have lost years of your life overnight; enough for a boy who looked about ten human years old to be born. The boy was apparently Rose's son with that evil human man. As you think about the boy, you ignore the remorse that your gemstone is trying to have you feel. Was it wrong to yell at him? Yes, but damn it you deserve a chance to breathe.

Rose is dead. *The boy is alive.*

The boy seemed so innocent for a human. She did not know many of them personally, but there was something else about him. He truly cared for her, yet she showed not a shred of compassion to him. Was that the part of Rose reaching out to her? He had her gem...could...could it be?

Was Rose really dead? Was *SHE* the boy?

Before you could ponder the situation longer, you notice a bird flying in the sky. It was carrying what appeared to be a series of parchments...though it looked different. You shrug and watch the

bird prepare to fly away before voices from out of nowhere beg it to drop its parcels. The bird complies, scattering a series of papers in the middle of the town square. It was then that you realize that this ghost town is actually rather populated. At once, scores of humans fly out of their homes to get a glimpse of the parchment and begin to shout in unison.

"Give it to me! I need to know what day it is!"

"You've looked at it too long! Please, I don't know where I am!"

You take the opportunity to slip away into the woods as you take in the situation. These people do not seem to remember anything at all. They don't know when it is or where they are...

Maybe Pearl was onto something. Maybe people CAN lose their memories here. But if that is the case...how could a Gem like you be affected?

"You seem lost in thought," a voice calls from behind you.

You turn around and see a little human boy with lavender hair wearing some kind of a cape. His eyes appeared to be droopy, as if he were suffering from a lack of sleep. You can't help but deny the kid's style in fashion, but you still want to be alone. Not even the interesting toy seahorse he was holding was enough to snap you out of it.

"My mom always told me that it helps to talk when things get rough. Do you want to talk?" he presses on.

"Go away, kid. I'm not in the mood for a conversation," you try to shoo him away.

"But I think talking would be a good thing," he tries again. "If you don't want to talk, I understand but at least have the decency to look me in the eyes and tell me it."

You begin to feel frustrated, but recognize this as the only way to be alone without completely losing it on the kid. As such, you decide it is just best to roll with it and tell it to his face. "I appreciate it kid, but..."

The second you stare into his eyes, your world turns dark. The last thing you hear is the sweet sound of the boy playing on the toy seahorse...

GWMAPT

"Look who has decided to rejoin the land of the living," Sanji took a long drag of his cigarette as Connie and Steven reappeared on the deck. The two were both blushing and had very red eyes. They did, however, look happy to see that the Going Merry had finally lowered anchor near the island where Amethyst had fled. "You two have been down there for quite a while. What have you two been doing for fifteen minutes? Have you been playing spin the bottle?"

With that, Sanji was punched by Pearl into the wall. The Gem looked murderous as she made her way to the aching form of the cook. "No! None of that! Shame on you!"

"Pearl..." Garnet warned her. "Don't hurt him too badly."

"But..." Pearl began but stopped as Garnet turned her hand into a gauntlet, causing the chef's eyes to widen as he began to stir again.

"Never. Again," Garnet warned him.

"Gotcha," Sanji gulped.

"Now that you have embarrassed the kids beyond repair," Greg patted his son on the back, causing him to smile. "What exactly is your plan here? We've docked the ship, so now what?"

"A good question, Mr. Universe. Miss Navigator, do we know what island this is?" Robin asked Nami, who was seemingly a bit more open than before. "It should be relatively close to the Long Ring Long Land archipelago if that helps."

"Give me a moment...let me figure out where my maps are." With that, Nami went to get them. However, a map was suddenly thrown at her. "Wha...?!"

She looked around frantically to find the source before seeing a hand wave from the wall. Looking further, she could see additional

hands leading into the women's quarters much to Chopper's confusion and fear. The young reindeer stared at them intently as Nami just sighed and looked at the map that was handed to her.

"This was the last one you were working on. I assumed that it was related to this area..." Robin explained.

"Hmm...it lines up. Let me see...judging by this map and the coral that is surrounding the island...oh no," Nami put the map down in object horror. "How did I not see this when I was apparently making this map?! We are in the Empyrean Section!"

Of the entire crew, only the former members of Baroque Works and Zoro showed any shock toward the statement, though Zoro's was more intrigue than anything. Rubbing his neck, Sanji gave a low chuckle. "Don't tell me you actually believe that shit."

"Believe?" Steven asked gently, still clearly getting over the events of earlier that day. "Believe what, Sanji?"

"It's some old superstitious legend that gets passed around every now and then. The shitty geezer told me about it when I was a kid and I didn't believe it then either."

"...would anyone NOT speaking vaguely like to elaborate?" Usopp rolled his eyes.

"Yeah! I want to know more about the Eucalyptus Section!" Luffy demanded.

"It's 'Empyrean,' you idiot," Petrea rubbed her temples. "Damn it; how the hell did you become a pirate captain?"

"My plucky determination?"

"Just...just stop," Petrea groaned. "To answer your question, the Empyrean Section is supposed to be a part of the Grand Line that is full of secrets and mysteries."

"I like it already!" Luffy exclaimed.

The chocolatier stared at him, took a deep breath, and continued. "It

is a series of islands deep in the first half of the Grand Line that is unexplained...but not unexplored. From what I have heard, people go into the dreaded zone hoping to crack the mystery and are never seen again..."

"OH NO!" Chopper and Usopp yelled at the same time.

"Our chocolatier is close, but is missing a few key points," Robin jumped in. "For starters, this is a very real story. I know for a fact that scientists, explorers, and archaeologists have all indeed returned from expeditions of the area, but they were never able to explain what they witnessed while they were here. Even the few people who bring back proof are unable to elaborate on what they have found or what their own notes meant. It is, quite simply, a mystery that has gone unsolved for hundreds of years."

"So it is like the Bermuda Triangle?" Connie asked. "This sounds like a great adventure...when you don't think about all of the negative stuff..."

"We can't focus on the negative stuff, Connie," Steven took a deep breath. "If we do, we will just keep being sad. Plus, we will miss out on all the fun that is sure to be had together for the first time being a pirate crew...again, apparently!"

"Well-spoken, Steven," Robin smiled. "Though I do have to wonder, why were we traveling so close to this stretch of sea?"

"Judging from this map, we drifted slightly off course after leaving the archipelago. It probably happened after I fell asleep...which it seems is when I 'lost my memories,'" Nami put the words in air quotes.

"Do you still doubt everything, Nami...even after all of that?" Connie asked.

The navigator read the map and then looked back to the door containing the paintings. "It doesn't feel right...but it is getting harder to doubt it as hard as that is to admit. Even the log book checks out...though I still have no idea why I would join a pirate as inexperienced as Luffy..."

"Hey! I already told you! It's because of my plucky determination!" Luffy defended himself.

"That remains to be seen..."

"Well, let's get off the ship and explore the island! Maybe Amethyst has found help!" Steven said optimistically before slightly frowning again. It was clear that he was still dealing with a lot but he was doing his best to see the good in the situation.

"Maybe indeed," Garnet nodded. "Let's go explore this Empyrean Island."

"Actually the name 'Empyrean' refers to the Empyrean Sea, which is the name of this part of the ocean. The island's name is Krankor Island," Nami clarified for the Gem.

"'Krankor Island?' What kind of a name is that?" Peridot snorted to herself. The Gem had been relatively silent since Amethyst left, but had nevertheless been listening in.

"A silly name!" Steven smiled. "It sounds like my kind of place. I'm sure you will love it, Peridot!"

"...you...you are still willing to talk to me?"

"Of course! Why wouldn't I?" Steven patted her on the back. "You're a Gem too! Don't we all have to stick together? That's why we have to get back Amethyst!"

Peridot was silent for a moment as she tried to hide her blushing. "Yes...yes, we do! I propose we start the search posthaste!"

"Agreed," Zoro nodded. "The longer we sit here, the more likely the purple owl would have flown away."

"Her name is Amethyst," Steven corrected him.

"Yeah, whatever."

"Well, I hope you all are careful," Greg told the group. "If anyone needs me, I will be here waiting until you guys have this all settled."

"Greg, you are coming along too," Garnet folded her arms.

"...really? Is that wise? I mean, you have always told me to stay as far away from you guys as possible when you are on missions..."

"Greg, I will be the first to admit that the way we treated you in the past was unfair. We took you to be just another human and nothing more...but even without your Devil Fruit powers, I have to say we were wrong. You aren't just another human...you are the only human who truly won the heart of Rose Quartz," Garnet smiled at him. "That alone is enough to put you above the rest. We should have given you the chance to be a bigger part of Steven's life before...but we need to change that now."

"Do you really mean it? Wouldn't I just get in the way?" Greg scratched his head, clearly uncomfortable with the Gems' change in attitude toward how he remembered them.

"I don't play tennis with just anybody, Greg. You are just as much of a Crystal Gem as your son is," Garnet affirmed, causing Greg's eyes to light up.

"You are family, Greg...whether we want you to be or not," Pearl forced a smile. "Besides, your powers might come in handy."

"What possible way could creating an air guitar come in handy?"

"You'd be surprised..."

"I've been surprised all day, Pearl. That's the theme for today it seems," Greg laughed to himself. He blinked for a moment and turned to Garnet. "Wait, when did we start playing tennis?"

"You'll know when you get your memories back," Garnet replied.

"Wait...is THAT where you go when you are on your weekend missions?!" Pearl yelled before regaining composure. "Oh, forget it! Let's go get Amethyst and return your memories so we can move on!"

"Do I have to come too?" Genevieve asked. "This seems like it is going to be a lot of work..."

"YES!" everybody responded at once.

"...aww..."

GWMAPT

Upon arriving on the island, it was decided that splitting up would be a terrible idea. Though they could cover more ground, the fact that most of them lost their memories was working against them. As such, they explored the island together as a group. It was a perfect time for them to ask the important questions that had yet to be asked.

"So, you guys are, like, rocks that are alive?" Luffy asked.

"You might say that," Garnet nodded.

"So...do you guys eat?"

"We can though we do not need to. Personally, I find all human food to be disgusting...though the process of cooking it is rather calming at times," Pearl admitted. "However, Amethyst can and will ingest anything she gets her hands on."

"So...can you guys poop?" Luffy asked with the utmost sincerity in his voice.

"EVEN WITHOUT YOUR MEMORIES, YOU STILL ASK THAT VULGAR QUESTION?!" Pearl yelled angrily.

"Oh, I asked that already? What was your answer?" Luffy pressed the issue.

"...oh, look! We have come across a small town. Why don't we see if anyone here has seen Amethyst?" Pearl switched the subject as fast as she could.

"The chances of there being any humans living here would be very slim..." Robin stroked her chin as she thought about it. "This area of the Grand Line is said to be uninhabited given the mysterious nature surrounding it. We are either walking into uncharted waters here or we are merely seeing the ruins of a once proud people..."

"Is that a bad thing?" Peridot asked.

"On the contrary; I find it to be incredibly exciting," Robin clarified. "I might be able to learn more about a mystery that even Professor Clover himself could not explain. It is like a dream come true."

"...fascinating," Peridot nodded. "How many mysterious landmasses are there on this 'Grand Line?'"

"Almost as many as stars in the sky," she chuckled as Peridot cocked her head upwards to the still lit sky to view it with wonder. "Perhaps you will be able to assist me in learning more about them while you are here."

"Really? You would ask for my assistance in these matters?" Peridot asked quickly and excitedly.

"I would if you were interested. There is always something new to learn if you open your eyes to it."

As Peridot began to grin uncontrollably, the others had begun to explore the ghost town. It was in a state of ruin, yet it appeared as if it was tampered with recently. Pearl, the more observant one of the group, noticed this immediately. "We are not alone here."

"Where? This place looks more rundown than Mr. 4's face," Damian chuckled to himself as he picked his nose. "It's too quiet to be populated."

"Jinkies!" Connie exclaimed from a bush that she was investigating.

"Connie said 'jinkies!'" Steven started to run over to her. "It must be a clue!"

"Look what I found!" Connie pulled out a severely worn-out newspaper, which was promptly snatched by Sanji. He looked it over and started to laugh.

"Let's see...Aqua Laguna expected to arrive sooner than expected...cruise liner 'Minnow' lost for three days after departure...remembering Victoria Cindry on the twelfth anniversary of her death...wait..." Sanji hit his head as he shuffled back to the first

page and then threw it over to Damian. "Look at this. It has today's date, you shitty bomb-idiot! The beautiful rock lady is right. I bet if we checked these houses, we would find people."

"But why?" Nami asked, pointing at the decrepit houses. "Why would people live like this on a daily basis? There are no signs of any repair or upkeep for what has to be years at minimum!"

"This case is getting more interesting with every new clue we find!" Steven clapped his hands. "I feel like a detective...like Batman!"

"Or Sherlock Holmes?" Connie offered. "Maybe Dogcopter?"

"...no. Definitely Batman," Steven shook his head, causing Connie to both roll her eyes and laugh.

"As interesting as this is, we need to focus on the bigger picture here: namely finding Amethyst and restoring your memories," Pearl reminded them. "We can't return back to Beach City with you in this condition or without Amethyst."

"Couldn't they all be connected?" Genevieve shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe these people haven't repaired the town because they forgot how to repair it?"

"That's a good hypothesis!" Usopp chimed in. "We need to examine every possible lead. I will go and check out the most uninhabited part of the island and..."

"One: we have already established that splitting the party up is a bad idea. Two: it is far safer to be in an area like this than an uninhabited area that could lull you with a false sense of security," Garnet listed stoically. "Or go and do what you want. I don't care either way."

The liar opened his mouth to respond before processing every likely outcome in his head. "I...I shall stay here then!"

"Good choice."

Suddenly, Garnet and Zoro tensed up. The two turned their heads toward a wooded area on the far side of the town. "You heard that

too?"

"Indeed, swordsman. We are being watched."

"Then let's not be rude and introduce ourselves," Zoro grinned. "I might have no idea where two of these swords came from, but damn it if I don't want to try them out."

"What if it is Amethyst?" Steven asked worriedly as everybody started to follow Garnet and Zoro rush towards the thing that was watching them. "You can't hurt her!"

"I don't think that is Amethyst!" Garnet called to him. "I think we are about to get some answers about this!"

"Oh! You must be using Future Vision!" Connie exclaimed excitedly.

"...Future...Vision?" Steven asked, clearly unfamiliar with the concept.

"You'll know when you get your memories back! Come on!" Connie deflected the question and ran as fast as she could, clutching her backpack all the way.

As they ran, the children began to see who it was that they were now chasing. It was a young boy roughly their age with lavender hair, a yellow cap, and some kind of a cape. He appeared to be holding something and was running as fast as he could. Surprisingly, he was making quite a bit of distance compared to them. After leading them away from the ruined houses, Garnet apparently had enough and jumped high in the air. She landed right in front of the boy and caused him to stumble backwards in shock.

"Gah! Pi...pirates?! How...how did you do that?" he asked.

"That's the wrong question, little man. Tell us why you were spying on us!" Garnet demanded intently.

"You...you were the first visitors we have had to our village in years! We...we aren't supposed to talk to outsiders and..." the boy stammered before Garnet grabbed him by the shirt. It was now clear that he was holding a rather portly seahorse toy of some kind.

"Garnet?! What are you doing?!" Steven yelled.

"That was a lie. Do not do that again!" Garnet warned in an intimidating manner.

"Why are you being so rough with him?! He's just a kid!" Nami rushed to the youth's aid. "What is wrong with you?!"

"This boy is not who he seems," Garnet held him higher. "Every possible future I have seen has shown this boy as the cause of our problems!"

"And do you think scaring the kid is going to make him talk?!" Nami retorted. "I know you are some kind of alien rocks, but come on!"

"Nami is right, Garnet," Pearl agreed. "This is not going to get us anywhere."

The Gem warrior looked down at the scared child and frowned. She set the boy down and motioned for the pirates to surround them. "Very well. We will try a different approach. You. Boy. Tell me your name."

"...Noko," he muttered.

"State your purpose with us, Noko," Garnet continued. In a flash, she transformed her hand into a gauntlet. "And tell the truth."

"...I guess that is better...but not by much," Nami groaned and hit her head in frustration.

"I...I..." Noko stammered before sighing. "I guess I'm going to have to do this the hard way, aren't I?" He snapped his fingers and at once a figure jumped down toward them. Of course, it was a figure recognizable by all of them.

"AMETHYST!"

"The purple owl!" Zoro exclaimed.

"Amethyst...'Garnet'...interesting names," Noko began to laugh, his former fear completely vanished. "I wonder what would happen if I

put you two together like a rock in a hard place?" He ignored the single chuckle coming from Damian and continued. "You. Shatter her for me, would you?"

"Amethyst!" Garnet did a double-take. "I didn't see this at..." Before she could finish her thought, Amethyst wordlessly materialized her whip and began to attack Garnet with everything she had. The Gem was taken aback by both the situation and her ferocity. This was not the Amethyst that Garnet knew nor was she even the Amethyst who bemoaned the loss of Rose Quartz two mere hours before...

This was an Amethyst who was being used like a marionette.

"All right! A fight!" Luffy cracked his knuckles before being blocked by Pearl's staff.

"Fighting Amethyst while she is out of control is too much for you to handle! Only a Gem can take on another Gem! Focus on that small child and figure out what he is doing to her!" Pearl ordered, pointing into the woods where Noko had fled. "I will assist Garnet with Amethyst!"

"But...but Pearl, what if something goes wrong?! What if Amethyst hurts you?! What if..." Steven started before Pearl put her finger to his lips.

"Steven, everything will be fine. No matter what happens, just remember that you are loved," Pearl smiled softly. "Now, get to safety before Amethyst does something that she will later regret!"

Steven opened his mouth to protest, but the look in Pearl's eyes stopped him mid-thought. They had a look of a Gem who was remorseful about what was about to do and fearful about the outcome. Steven did not know if Pearl and Amethyst had traded blows like this in the period of time that he could not remember, but he knew that the two often quarreled with each other like siblings. How did the two treat each other now? How had they grown?

These were questions Steven desperately wanted to ask, but even he knew that now was not the time for it. He needed to find Noko and see what his plan was. Maybe...just maybe...maybe he could

convince him to stop by talking things out with him.

Of course, that would require him to catch up to the Straw Hats and stop them from hurting him first.

GWMAPT

This is how it feels to be Amethyst for what feels like forever:

You are trapped in your own body, unable to resist the commands of the human child you met earlier.

You ignore the humans who flee the scene as you engage your opponents.

You find yourself being forced to fight the two oldest friends you have left.

And yet...you do not want to fight it.

The amount of anger and frustration that you have is overwhelming. Rose would not want you to fight them, true, but you want to lash out on someone. The Gems are the only ones who can handle your fury and you know it. This is truly the worst day of your life and you cannot take it anymore. This situation hurts more than when Pearl makes subtle jabs at Kindergartens.

Pearl never realizes the pain she causes you. Now it is time to return the favor.

You know that you are truly outmatched when it comes to skill, but you are not letting it stop you. Pearl is doing everything her power to stop you, but you refuse to back down. She dodges every swipe you throw at her. She parries to the left, you counter to the right and catch her in the neck.

"Amethyst! Please snap out of this!" Pearl begs of you. "You aren't you! You can't let that human boy control you like that!"

"It's no use, Pearl," Garnet replies as she grabs your whip and throws you in the air. "We can't reach her. I don't know why I didn't see this as a possibility..."

As you fly up, you decide to curl yourself into a ball and spin all the way down into the apparent de-facto leader of the Gems. You ignore the small pangs of regret that are coming from your gem and focus on your rage.

Rose is dead. They are alive. *You are mad.*

The Soothing Mist

As Steven made his way through the trees, he was surprised at how far behind he was compared to the others. He knew that he wasn't as in shape as the rest of the pirates were, but he at least expected to see them ahead of him. In fact, he couldn't even find his father, which worried him. It soon became apparent that Steven was, quite simply, lost in the woods.

"Okay...dad always told me that if I was lost, I should look for the North Star!" Steven told himself as he looked up at the sky. Unfortunately for him, it was still daylight. "Darn it! Now what am I going to do?"

The boy slumped to the ground and let out a big sigh. He was too overwhelmed by the sight of the Gems fighting each other to think clearly. Getting lost was only the cherry on top of a Together Breakfast of emotions. He thought that he had seen the worst after Amethyst's initial verbal assault earlier in the day, but this was too much for him to handle. Steven might have seen some interesting things during the last year of his life, but those memories and feelings that could have given him strength were as lost as he was. All he had left to guide him was the calming breeze.

It was in that breeze that he heard a faint noise.

Steven looked from side to side to discover its origin, but could neither see nor hear anyone around him. Puzzled, the half-Gem closed his eyes and tried to listen in again. He tried to let his mind wander away from his current location and attempted to focus on the faint sound. It was as if something was slowly being unlocked in Steven, but he could not figure out what it was. All that he knew was that if he focused hard enough, he might find his friends and family again. Finally, he was surprised to pick up what Steven could only described as an "aura." It was faint and distant, but Steven was compelled to chase towards it.

As Steven ran closer toward it, he closed his eyes again and pinpointed a vague blue shape in his mind's eye. It was clearly the

aura he was picking up, and Steven was becoming very confused as to what exactly he was doing. Something inside him told him to keep going, but it was a surreal experience to say the least. In the end, Steven just assumed it was one of his mother's powers that the Gems neglected to tell him about and resolved to ask them about it when all of this was sorted out. Regardless, Steven was too focused on his family to enjoy unlocking a new ability.

"If I were a blue thing, where would I be?" Steven looked around the wooded area. Based on his new power, the being with the blue aura should be right near him. After a bit of searching, he found what was giving it off: the boy named Noko. He was crouched down beside a bush whispering to his toy seahorse, which surprisingly gave off its own blue glow. What was surprising to Steven was his demeanor. Gone was the cocky, confident child who threatened the group before. In his place was a cowering boy who was clearly afraid for his life. What had happened in such a short amount of time?

"Hey! It's Noko, right?" Steven called out from behind him.

The mere mention of his name caused the youth to jump and drop the seahorse. He turned around and locked eyes with Steven. His eyes looked different from before...almost more expressive. If Steven didn't know any better, he could have been a completely different person. "It's you! One of the pirates!"

"That's right! I'm one of the pirates that you took memories from! I'm Steven Universe!" Steven pointed out. "Why did you do that?!"

"Why does it matter to you?" Noko shifted back, his eyes darting to the toy seahorse.

"Why wouldn't it matter to me?! I lost a year's worth of fun times and adventures! My dad lost years of time hanging out with me! Amethyst lost every memory of me that she ever had! Now you have her fighting her best friends like she is some kind of mindless doll on a string!" Steven yelled, surprising even himself at the anger he possessed in that moment. "Please! Please give us back our memories and let Amethyst go! Please!"

"You...you aren't here to fight me?" Noko asked, clearly surprised.

"No! I just want everything to go back to normal! I want my family back! I want to know who I am and what I have done! I don't know why you would steal memories, but I am sure you have a good reason! If I can help you, I will...but please help us. Please, Noko."

The boy stopped looking at the seahorse and blinked several times. He looked like he was trying to have an internal debate with himself. "I've been terrible to you. I am literally forcing your friend to kill your other friends. I stole your precious memories. Despite all of that, you...you would still offer to help us...I mean...help me?"

"If you said you were sorry and gave everyone their memories back, then of course I would help you!" Steven smiled and offered the boy his hand.

"But why?"

"Because I'm a Crystal Gem!" Steven announced. "It's what I do!"

The second Steven said "Crystal Gem," the half-Gem noticed the boy's eye had started to twitch. He looked back at the seahorse and slowly Steven started to put things together. "That's a cool toy you have there, Noko. Where did you get it?"

Before he could answer, the two found themselves surrounded by the Straw Hats, Greg, Connie, and Peridot. Zoro was leading the charge, much to Luffy's chagrin. His swords were drawn and Steven could see the anger in his eyes. He was not the only one, as all of the Straw Hats seemed justifiably angry upon meeting the one who was responsible for their current misfortune.

"Steven!" Greg called to him. "Thank goodness you are okay! I couldn't find you back there and..."

"Kid, you did well," Zoro cut him off. "We've been looking for this little snake for some time now. Good to see that one of you apparently knows what he is doing. It's time to get some answers before I get bored."

"Guys, listen to me!" Steven tried to appeal to the pirates. However, they were apparently not in a mood to listen. The group continued to

move closer to the two, with Noko shifting his gaze between them, Steven, and the seahorse. "I was just getting him to talk it out with me!"

"I'll get him to talk about his crimes, kid," Petrea frowned and jumped in the air. "I'll get him to sing! **10,000 Kilo Guillotine!**" She plummeted down toward the boy, who was now cowering in fear.

"No!" Steven interjected. "Don't hurt him!" With a shining burst of light, Steven's gem produced his pink shield and protected the cowering youth. Petrea continued her descent and landed squarely on the defensive Gem weapon. The look on her face was one of confusion while Steven was amazed that he was able to summon his shield at all.

"What?! Kid, he stole our memories! He is controlling your purple friend! Why are you defending him?!" Petrea demanded an answer and she jumped off of the shield.

"I'm defending him because he has to have a reason for doing this! What gives us the right to attack him without knowing why? Look at him! He's afraid for his life!" Steven pointed to the youth behind him.

Noko, for his part, had clutched his seahorse even tighter upon seeing Steven's shield. He began to twitch and began to fixate upon the pink weapon. "Rose's shield..." He picked up the seahorse and prepared to strike Steven from behind. "ROSE'S SHIELD!"

Before his attack could finish, he was taken back by a powerful voice. "**Steven, look out!**" Greg Universe shouted. He was unaware that he had accidentally utilized his Devil Fruit power, but the amplified shouting was enough to knock Noko off-guard. The boy flew back into a tree and hit his head. The second he did so, the seahorse flew in the air and hit a giant rock near Greg with great force.

"Jeez! I didn't mean to hurt the kid! Please don't tell your mother about this, Connie! I try really hard to keep a respectable image in front of Priyanka," Greg said as he rushed over to check on his son and the boy.

"Your secret is safe wi...wait. What did you say, Mr. Universe?" Connie stopped dead in her tracks as she replayed his comment in her mind.

"...the part about hurting the kid?" Greg asked as he looked over Steven. "You seem to be doing okay, Schtoo-ball! He didn't hurt you or anything, did he?"

"No! I don't think that he was working alone! I think that his..." Steven started before getting interrupted by Connie.

"Mr. Universe, you just said my mother's name! You didn't even know my name before! Whatever you did just now caused you to get back some of your memories!" Connie said excitedly.

"I did? But...but I don't remember eating that fruit-thing or anything else," Greg blinked. "Did anyone else get back their memories?"

"I still hate most of you, so I think you are alone on that front," Nami frowned and folded her arms. "Does this mean we each have to knock out a child before we get back our memories?"

"I don't mind," Damian cracked his neck. "The punk deserves it."

"Agreed. Anyone who would put such beautiful ladies in this situation deserves to be taught some proper manners," Sanji moved forward menacingly only to be blocked by Steven.

"No! Guys, listen to me! I don't think it was him! Well...maybe it was him a bit, but I don't think it was only him!" Steven tried to explain before getting flustered.

"Steven, you aren't making any sense," Peridot shook her head. "Have you cracked your gem?!"

"...no?" Steven said slowly as he examined his gemstone. "No. Look, I am making perfect sense! When I was talking to him, Noko kept looking at his seahorse toy! I don't think that it is just a toy!"

"And what would make you think it is nothing more than an entertainment device?" Peridot asked. "Hopefully not purely your innocent, empathetic outlook on the world?"

"It's hard to explain, but when I was lost in the woods, I found Noko by following his aura...I think. But Noko wasn't the only one who I was able to sense..." Steven pointed to the discarded seahorse that landed near where Greg was standing.

"...you were sensing his aura?" Connie asked. "You've never done that before!"

"I haven't?"

"We can discuss the kid's spontaneous powers later," Damian interjected. "Do you honestly expect us to believe that a toy was controlling its owner?"

"Is that really harder to believe than talking rocks and dimensional travel?" Usopp pointed out.

"...fair enough..." he conceded. "But assuming that the seahorse thing is to blame for all of this, why would it want to control the other kid?"

"To steal our memories?" Steven offered. "Maybe it needed help?"

"That's ridiculous," Peridot scoffed. "There is no logical reason why memories would become a valuable commodity...unless it were used as a combative effort! Steven, reconsider your pleas of mercy!"

"Maybe we should be focusing less on why the seahorse would be stealing memories and more on the fact that *he* got *his* memories back!" Nami pointed to Greg. "Clearly his yelling caused something to happen!"

"Yeah, I nearly killed that kid when he hit the tree..." Greg muttered.

"That's it!" Connie exclaimed. "The seahorse hit that rock super hard! Maybe the seahorse was being used as a memory jar!"

"I don't follow..." Greg scratched his head.

"Think of a piggy bank, Mr. Universe. The coins go in but can't get out unless you either unplug it or..."

"Or break it open," Greg nodded. "Geez...am I really going to add animal abuse to the list of things I will have complied by the end of today?"

"It's a living toy," Luffy cracked his knuckles. "That means it's not a real animal. I'm gonna kick its ass!"

Luffy then turned around to make good on his declaration. He walked up to it and picked it up. "Hear that, seahorse? I'm gonna kick your ass!"

The second Luffy made his threat, the eyes of the toy seahorse blinked and glared maliciously at the pirate. Finally, it made a noise much to the surprise of the pirate. He dropped it and watched as the seahorse began to float in front of him and continued to make low, guttural noises.

"It IS alive?!" Greg jumped. "Holy smokes!"

"What is it doing?" Robin stepped back from it.

"It...it's talking!" Chopper gulped. "It is actually a girl...I think...and she keeps repeating the same things over and over again!"

"You can understand that thing?!" Usopp pointed at it.

"What is she saying?!" Connie asked as she pulled out her sword defensively, which only made the seahorse angrier.

"She keeps repeating 'Need more!' and 'Rose Quartz!'"

"...mom?" Steven asked, clearly confused and concerned. "How does she know my mom?"

GWMAPT

On the other side of the forest, Pearl and Garnet were doing their best to keep Amethyst at bay. She was like a vicious animal let out of her cage. This was not the carefree Gem the two knew nor was she the impetuous youth of their memories. As such, it was hard to keep up with her without doing anything that could crack her gemstone. All three of them were considerably battered and bruised,

though only Garnet and Pearl showed it.

"Amethyst, please stop this at once!" Pearl pleaded yet again. "This isn't accomplishing anything!"

"It's not going to matter, Pearl," Garnet shook her head as she grabbed Amethyst's whip and sent an electrical charge back at her. "Her mind is completely wiped thanks to the machinations of that boy."

"Well, we have to keep trying to reach her! She's going to force us to do something we will regret if we don't!"

"Or worse: she'll do something she will regret," Garnet said grimly as Amethyst bounced back and charged at them with her spin dash.

The fighting continued for several minutes. Neither side was gaining an advantage over the other. Pearl and Garnet had the strength and experience, but their physical forms were growing weary. Amethyst was not tied down to such limitations at the present moment, so she was able to continue her assault uninterrupted. It soon became clear to the two Gems that they were running out of options...something needed to be done.

"I don't think we have a choice anymore," Garnet coughed. "We need to do it."

"But what if it doesn't work?" Pearl asked.

"I...I don't know," Garnet replied bitterly. "But we need to do something or else Steven could suffer..."

"He'll suffer either way!" Pearl bit her lip in frustration. Finally, she snapped. "Gah! Just do it, Amethyst! I'm the one you want! I'm the one who upset you! Yes, I'm upset that Rose is gone! Is that what you want to hear?!"

The mute Gem readied her whip yet again. Pearl stood her ground, crying as she gripped her staff with all of her might. "I loved her, Amethyst! I loved her more than anything in my life! In fact, I STILL love her and will never stop loving her! But now I love Steven and everything that he represents! You do too! Please, for his sake, just

stop!"

In the forest surrounding them, the unmistakable voice of Greg sounded out. The Gems were surprised by it, but were too focused on Amethyst to do anything about it. However, just moments after his shout blared, Amethyst stumbled to the ground. Her body started to convulse and her two teammates instantly rushed to her side.

"Amethyst! Amethyst, snap out of it!" Pearl grabbed her and tried to sit her up. "Garnet, what do we do?! What happened?!"

"Greg happened...I think," Garnet said as she assisted Pearl. "Whatever he just did caused the connection between the boy and Amethyst to become severed. I think when she wakes up, Amethyst will be herself."

Pearl looked down at her now-still form and wiped a tear away. "Will she have all of her memories?"

"Let's ask her," Garnet replied. She gently tapped Amethyst's face. "Amethyst, wake up. I know you can hear me. Come back to us..."

After a few moments of waiting, the purple Gem started to cough and groan. Her eyes opened slowly and she looked from side to side. "Ugh...what...what happened to me? I feel like I...ugh...got hit by a rock."

"Amethyst!" the two Gems exclaimed in unison.

"Woah...you guys look like...like I feel," Amethyst weakly laughed. "I had the weirdest dream..."

"Was it about Rose?" Pearl asked slowly.

"Yeah! Some kid said that Rose died and...and that wasn't a dream, was it?" Amethyst sighed and started to cry. "Was it?!"

"No," Garnet shook her head. "It wasn't."

"How can you guys just accept it?!" Amethyst wailed, too weak to move from the previous battle. It seemed like all the fighting finally caught up with her. "How can you guys even go on?!"

"Because it is what Rose would have wanted," Garnet replied in a gentle voice. "We've had years to adjust to her passing...it wasn't fair for you to find out in the manner that it occurred. For that, we are all sorry. Even if your memories never return, it won't change anything."

"But it's not fair!"

"No. No it's not," Pearl nodded her head and helped Amethyst wipe away her tears. "But neither is attacking Steven for the crime of being born. He can't help the fact that Rose made that choice and we can't project our own feelings onto him...but I know what you are going through. We both do. I will never get over not having Rose Quartz in my life, but I can't hate Greg for winning her heart...or Steven for being the embodiment of that choice."

"...I'm sorry, but I can't let it go..." Amethyst sniffled before getting stopped by Garnet.

"We aren't asking you to right now," Garnet told her. "That wouldn't be fair for you to do. All that we ask is to consider Steven's feelings right now...I know he is thinking of yours."

As Amethyst stopped to consider what Garnet told her, a dark mist started to appear from the edge of the woods. It stopped just short of where the exhausted Gems were resting, but the implications of it were very clear.

"Garnet..." Pearl started to say urgently.

"I know. Amethyst, stay here. We will come back for you. Just remember this: Rose wasn't the only one who loved you. You aren't alone and you never will be," Garnet smiled before adopting a serious face. "If you'll excuse us, we have to save the day."

Amethyst watched her friends leave to venture into the unknown to go assist Rose's son and the one who won her heart. As they hurried away, the Gem decided to take the moment to calm herself down and to make some serious life choices.

"...he did have a cool shirt," Amethyst forced herself to chuckle after a long moment of deep, introspective thought.

GWMAPT

Nico Robin was ready for nearly anything. She had accepted the crews' memory loss and even why Amethyst would have such a strong emotional outburst at Steven, but nothing could have prepared her for what was occurring in front of her very eyes. The seahorse, clearly threatened by the realization that her human front was discarded and her secret found out, had retaliated by spitting out a deep, dark mist from her mouth. The Straw Hats were instantly put on the defensive while they waited to see what was happening.

"Don't breathe it in!" Zoro commanded before holding his breath. "It could be poisonous!"

"Too late!" Greg gulped as he started to cough theatrically. "I'm a goner! Steven, I'll never see you get into college or accomplish any other life goals you might have! Remember me as the best dad you've ever had!"

"Dad! No!" Steven rushed to his father's side and started to cry.

"THE HUMAN IS DYING! WE NEED A DOCTOR!" Chopper ran around frantically.

"You are the doctor!" Greg clutched at his heart.

"THAT'S RIGHT! I NEED TO SAVE YOUR LIFE!" Chopper tripped as he continued his frantic pace, causing Nami to sigh.

"Stop being dramatic!" Nami scolded them. "It's not poisonous...or, if it is, it's not immediately harmful."

"So, what is it?" Luffy asked. "Just a way for it to escape?"

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Connie bit her lip. "The seahorse knew Steven's mom's name and now we are trapped and blinded...nothing about this screams 'a good time is about to be had.'"

"WE ARE ALL GOING TO BE SHATTERED!" Peridot wailed as she circled around everyone. "GAH!"

"No one is going to shatter you," a commanding feminine voice called out from the smoke. "On the contrary, I am here to commend you!"

The sudden voice caused Peridot to stop where she was. She practically fell to the ground in excitement and shock. "That...that voice! It couldn't be!"

"Peridot, how could you possibly know someone on this island beyond our crew?" Robin asked as she looked for the source of the voice. "You only got here yesterday!"

"But...but it's her!" Peridot stood herself up and tried to get all of the dirt off of her body.

"Who?" Robin asked.

To Robin's utter shock and amazement, a giant being appeared out of nowhere. She had a pointed, upturned nose and a very large neck. Her long dress was the same color as her yellow skin. She wore her hair in a bob with two spiked tips at the end. Her pupils were shaped like the diamond in the center of her chest. Regardless, it was clear that this woman commanded great authority. She was flanked by a smaller being who looked suspiciously like Pearl, the biggest difference being her own yellow hue and having her gemstone embedded in her chest.

"My Diamond: Yellow Diamond!" Peridot whispered in awe. At once, she positioned her arms in an odd, square salute. She then coughed and addressed the being directly. "My Diamond! I...how..."

"How is not important, my most precious Peridot. Once I heard of your efforts to terminate my Cluster, I knew I needed to speak to you at once. A Diamond refuses to let such petty things like dimensional travel get in the way of that," Yellow Diamond explained. "A being with your prestige must have a good reason to go back on my direct order!"

"I...that is to say that...the Earth is..." Peridot stammered. "It is...a beautiful place that deserves to...to...well, I have some ideas and..."

"I trust your judgment, Peridot," Yellow Diamond beamed. "I have decided that you shall be in charge of all matters involving the Earth! How does that sound to you?"

Peridot nearly fainted in shock. Robin tried to catch her and gazed up at the giant woman and her silent aide. The sight was incredible to say the least and was surprised that nobody else was making a scene about the situation. However, she turned around and saw a sight that made her drop Peridot back to the ground. It seemed as if a number of people appeared from out of nowhere and were conversing with the individual Straw Hats. Sanji was talking to an older gentlemen with a beard and a chef's hat, Luffy was talking to a red-headed gentleman with one arm, Nami with a middle-aged woman smoking a cigarette, Zoro with a young girl who looked strikingly like Tashigi, Chopper with a crazy looking gentleman, Usopp with a young girl with blonde hair, Petrea with a man and woman who looked almost like her, Damian to an older gentleman who shared his hair, Genevieve to a young looking couple, Connie to the Maheswarans, and Steven...Robin couldn't believe her eyes.

Steven and Greg were talking to Rose Quartz.

It was impossible to comprehend. Rose Quartz was dead; the past few hours made that fact incredibly clear. There was no way for her to be existing while Steven was alive. It was then that the archaeologist began to put the pieces together. Though Yellow Diamond or the Maheswarans could have easily come to this dimension through a Rifting Stone or some other kind of Gem technology, Rose Quartz had no such excuse. Each of the people who had materialized were the closest loved ones these people had. From Zoro's childhood friend to Damian's deceased father, Robin realized that this was the true power of the seahorse's mist. Somehow, the creature had used the mist to drain even more memories from everyone present, including Peridot and Connie.

This theory was solidified when the last person Robin ever expected walked out from the mist to greet her. It was a woman who could be described as Robin's body double with the biggest difference being that she possessed white hair as opposed to Robin's black hair. She walked toward Robin and smiled at her. "Hello, Robin. My, you've grown."

Robin did everything in her power to look away from the sight. She knew what was happening and felt repulsed by what the seahorse was doing. She was drawing the memories that soothed her from when she hurt the most in life and was using them to placate her in a way to siphon more from her. Robin knew why she and she alone was not as tempted as the others: she gave up hoping a long time ago. There wasn't some hidden desire that could soothe her into docility...the closest thing that could have done so was already in her life: her friends. Robin had always looked forward rather than backwards and, as such, was more repulsed at this charade than she had been in some time. "Do you honestly expect me to believe that you are real?!"

"I had to make it look real, Robin, but it's true. I'm me. Come with me! Ohara might be gone but you and I can travel the world together. I know I have been gone for so long, but I will make it up to you. I promise it as your..." the woman smiled before Robin punched her.

"YOU DON'T GET TO SAY THAT!" Robin shouted. The second the woman fell to the floor, the image of Nico Olvia disappeared. Knowing what had to be done, Robin created arms on every apparition that the seahorse created and prepared to destroy them in front of her friends' eyes. She knew that doing so would cause them great pain and suffering, especially for those who were conversing with the deceased for the first time in years...or, in Steven's case, the first time in his life.

But Robin knew they would feel this way no matter what. It was either do this for them or watch as their memories were completely stolen and their identities stripped away.

"Clutch." In one swift motion, Robin watched as her friends were forced to watch their loved ones vanish before their eyes. It was as terrible to watch as Robin feared. Grown men like Zoro, whom she had barely seen show true emotion, were now shedding tears. Others, like Peridot and Chopper, were yelling and freaking out. As for Steven and Greg? They just stood there for a moment and hugged each other as Greg let Steven cry into his shirt, ignoring the tears streaming down his own face.

"Are...are you all okay?" Robin asked nervously, unsure how to react. "I...I am sorry that I had to do that, but..."

"There's no need to apologize, Robin," Luffy replied in a low and dangerous voice. "You did what had to be done."

"Captain?"

"It is one thing to try to fight me in person, but this? This is nearly unforgivable," Luffy continued, his eyes now full of anger. "How dare she play with our emotions like that?! HAVEN'T YOU DONE THAT ENOUGH?! SHOW YOURSELF, YOU COWARD!"

In response to Luffy's demands, the familiar tones of the seahorse filled the mist. The Straw Hats, still trying to collect themselves, looked to a wailing Chopper to translate. "What did she say?" Petrea whispered, still in a state of shock and anger. "What did that bastard say?!"

"She said...she said ' No good memories? Then...then bad memories.'" Chopper gulped, forcing himself to snap out of it. The reindeer then transformed into his human form and stood his ground.

"If that isn't ominous, I don't know what is," Sanji lit a fresh cigarette. "You shitheads ready for this?"

"As ready as I am going to be," Damian adjusted his sunglasses.

"Agreed," Genevieve nodded. "Let's do...Connie?"

The poor girl, who had just witnessed her own parents seemingly die in front of her, had placed Rose's sword into the ground and was now leaning on it for support. She was breathing heavily as she tried to shake off her feelings. "It wasn't real. It wasn't real. It wasn't real," she repeated to herself.

Luffy, seeing this, walked over and put his hand on the girl's shoulder. "It's okay, Connie. Sit this out until you are ready."

"I..." Connie started before Luffy put his straw hat on her head.

"Captain's orders," he told her before returning to the forefront of the mist.

"Connie, come over here with us. Schtoo-ball and I are going to need a minute," Greg clutched Steven tight in his arms, cradling him as he cried. "I think he's gonna need you, kiddo."

"I'll come too," Genevieve added. "Just in case you need my help. Are you okay with this, Connie?"

The girl nodded and helped Greg move Steven down to a nearby tree to collect themselves. Robin was happy to see that they were moving out of harm's way. They were in no condition to face whatever horror the seahorse would throw at them. If the visions of loved ones were considered "good memories," then what were considered "bad memories?"

She then got her answer as several shapes appeared from the mist and began to attack the Straw Hats. She didn't know who several of them were, though she could make out vague descriptions. There was a man with glasses and some kind of sword contraption on his hands, an older gentleman with golden armor on, a blue Fishman, a heavysset man who looked strikingly like a hippo, and a muscular orange woman who was descending on Peridot. It took a moment but Robin finally recognized her as Jasper, who was the Gem that Lapis Lazuli forcibly fused with in Steven's dimension.

The others...the others she knew well enough: Sir Crocodile, Enel, Dracule Mihawk, the unmistakable form of a Celestial Dragon, and...and Admiral Aokiji. Aokiji was the man who was responsible for killing Jaguar D. Saul and for playing a part in the Buster Call that ravaged her home. Though he had allowed Robin to leave with her life, he was the one who Robin blamed the most for the most horrific tragedy in her life. Yes, Spandine was technically more responsible, but this man truly made her life hell.

This was the true terror of the seahorse: it could use your best memories to lull you into a state of docility or weaponize your worst memories to force you into submission. This was the situation the Straw Hats found themselves in...and this was the situation they would need to overcome to regain their memories.

GWMAPT

Steven could barely comprehend what was happening in front of his very eyes. He had been told all throughout his life that his mother had given up her physical form to bring him into this world. Everybody had accepted it as a truth and Steven never questioned it.

Yet Rose Quartz was standing right in front of him.

His father was just as moved by the sight of the eight-foot Gem. Tears streamed down into his beard as he gazed upon his wife again for the first time in years. "Rose...? How?"

"Amethyst figured it out before...all the unpleasantness," Rose bit her lip before walking up and staring Greg in the eyes. "This island has the ability to grant a person's greatest desire...I know it has to be true, because it is granting mine right now. How I've missed those eyes of yours..."

"Mom?" Steven finally got the courage to ask. "But...aren't you...me?"

Rose looked at her son in surprise, stars filling her eyes. "Steven, I'll always be half of you. But now you'll have me fully in your life. I'll watch you grow and you can tell me about all of your friends and..."

Before Rose could finish speaking, Steven ran up and hugged her. It was something he always dreamed of doing but never thought that he could. No matter what happened, this would be a moment he would cherish for the rest of his life.

That moment was then interrupted by arms materializing on Rose's shoulders. The hands gripped themselves on Rose's neck and Steven watched as his mother's eyes filled with dread. "Steven! I will always lo..."

At once, Steven cringed in horror as the image of his mother dissolved into nothingness. Deep down, Steven knew that she was not truly his mother, but it felt so good to see her in person for the first time in his life. She might not have been real, but she was truly

a beautiful Gem.

Regardless, it did not stop Steven from crying his little eyes out.

He retreated deep inside of himself as he felt his father embrace him. He knew that he must have been hurting just as much if not more than he was, but Steven was just too blinded by his emotions to process anything else. He just wanted to cry.

After what felt like an eternity to the boy, he opened his eyes to see that the Universe boys were not alone. Genevieve was there as well, but that wasn't who Steven was focused on. Connie was beside them, holding tight onto Steven's hand and wearing Luffy's hat. The sight of his best friends and father brought a small sense of comfort to him, but his heart still stung from the apparent deception that the seahorse caused him. He would never know his mother...but he did see some kind of facsimile of her.

In the end, isn't that enough?

"Dad...? Connie...? Genevieve...?"

"Steven!" they said in unison.

"We thought we lost you in a sea of crying there, buddy," Greg ruffled his hair. "I'm...I'm sorry you had to see that..."

"No...no. I'm okay, dad," Steven flashed a weak smile. "What about you?"

"I've been through worse..." Greg looked away and sighed. "The important thing is that you seem to be in better spirits."

"What is happening?" Steven asked as he gazed out into the mist.

"The seahorse thing seems to have created some kind physical versions of the Straw Hats' greatest enemies...and I think that is Jasper. She's a Gem from Homeworld who...it isn't important," Connie pointed to the orange Gem chasing after Peridot. "I'm assuming the one Nami is trying to fight is Arlong and there is Crocodile dueling Damian...I don't know about the others."

"I feel like I should remember these people...but I can't," Genevieve hanged her head in shame.

"How can that seahorse do that?" Steven asked. "I mean...I actually hugged mom."

"And I hugged my mom too," Connie nodded grimly. "I think all of the memories she absorbed from Amethyst made her incredibly strong...she gained hundred of years of memories from just her. Perhaps the more memories she absorbs, the stronger the constructs she creates? Think about it. That doesn't even include your memories or the others'...we still don't even know why she's doing this..."

"But I know someone who does," Steven got up and started to walk away from the fighting. "We need to talk to Noko."

"The kid?" Greg gulped. "Isn't he the cause of all of this? Isn't he the reason why your mom...no...I can't let myself get worked up over this. It won't do anyone any good. Lead the way, son."

The four tried to navigate the immediate area with Steven leading the way. He had pulled out his phone and was using it to light the way. After a moment, he found Noko still slumped over by the tree. Steven gently nudged him. "Hey. Noko...wake up, Noko."

The boy started to stir and groaned. He blinked and stared at Steven. Finally, he jumped back into the tree in shock. "Gah! It's you!"

"Yes! It's me!" Steven nodded. "Are you okay? You hit your head pretty bad on the tree."

"I can feel it," he rubbed his head. "What happened? Where..." Noko paused and looked around frantically. "Where is Tatsu?!"

"The mook from the *Ninja Turtles* movies?" Greg asked.

"She's not a turtle; she's the seahorse!" Noko shook his head. "Where is she?"

"See this mist?" Connie motioned all around them. "That's her doing."

She's trapping us in her by fighting our worst enemies...or something. We don't have a lot to go on."

"That's why we need your help!" Steven explained. "Tatsu is your friend, right? Help us stop her before she hurts more people!"

"Tatsu...Tatsu did that?" Noko whispered. "Tatsu wouldn't hurt anybody. She just wants her memories back."

"I knew there was a reason why you took our memories!" Steven smiled. "The seahorse is trying to use our memories to get back her own, right?"

Noko nodded. "She...I mean...she didn't do that when I first met her...she wanted to help me and..."

"Hold the phone. I sense a story behind this!" Steven said excitedly. He looked back at the fighting happening behind him and noticed that the Straw Hats were no longer fighting alone: Garnet and Pearl had joined the battle. "But let's make it a fast one. I don't know how long the crew and the Gems can hold Tatsu off."

The youth nodded and took a deep breath. "Okay, I'll try. You see, my father left a few months back to join the Iron Grenadier Pirates and it didn't sit right with a lot of people. The kids in my village bullied me mercilessly for it. Then it got worse when I ate a Devil Fruit on a dare from a kid who stole it from a traveler...the other villagers started to call me a thief and a freak."

"You ate a Devil Fruit?" Genevieve asked. "Which one?"

"The Nemu-Nemu Fruit. I can hypnotize people...but my mom told me that I shouldn't use my powers on other people," Noko bit his lip hard. "She'd be so disappointed in me...if she could remember who I was."

"What happened next?" Connie pressed on.

"My mom thought that I deserved a break from the bullying so she got two tickets on this expensive cruise liner called the 'Minnow.' Maybe you've heard of it. Celestial Dragons are known to use it from time to time. My mom saved up so much money for a great weekend

getaway...but we weren't so lucky..."

"Wait; I know that name. That was in the paper Sanji read before," Connie said as she snapped her fingers. "It disappeared three days ago!"

"That's right. We got stuck in a storm and crashed on this island. I thought things couldn't get any worse, but word somehow got out that I was the son of a pirate. It turned out another family from my village also booked tickets for the same cruise. Naturally, I got blamed for the ship's bad luck," Noko began to cry. "I tried to run as far away from everyone as I could, even leaving my mom behind. I needed to be alone...and then it happened."

"What happened?" Steven asked.

"I wasn't paying attention and I fell into the ocean. I thought I was going to drown for sure...but I was pulled out by the most unlikely of creatures: a little seahorse. I don't know why she did it, but she did. She kept giving me this weird look, like she really wanted to help me. We began to talk and I gave her the name Tatsu after an old friend of mine, Tatsumi, who moved to another island. As I explained my story to her, I let out all of my anger. She was a very good listener as I rambled on about everything...and that was where I thought it would end. I was wrong. I ended up taking a nap in the shade in an attempt to calm down, but by the time I returned to the rundown village the passengers were setting up camp in...everything was different."

"So there were people inside those houses," Connie gasped.

"Speak of the devil," Genevieve shrugged.

"That's right. Tatsu thought the best way to help me was to remove the memories of me ever having a pirate for a father...but she couldn't just stop at that. I argued with her, begging her to return everyone's memories back. However, she wouldn't stand for it and used her dream manipulation powers to...to take over my mind. She used me as a conduit or something to get more memories and to hypnotize the town into forgetting that they ever lived anywhere but here. The more they slept, the more dreams Tatsu could absorb.

That's why she wanted me to use her to steal your memories when your ship passed by..."

"She wanted to regain her own memories, right?" Steven asked.

"That's what she told me when she took over my mind. It was like I was free to do whatever I wanted...but I wanted to do what she wanted, you know? The closest thing that knocked me out of it was you, Steven," Tatsu gave a short laugh. "God, it sounds stupid when I explain it."

"So Tatsu must be the one who steals the memories of everyone who visits the Emphyrean Sector, right? How old is she?" Connie inquired.

"She doesn't even know," Noko admitted. "The last thing she remembers is a giant flash of light...I wish I could do more to help, but I don't even know what to do? I really think that she thinks that she is helping people while helping herself."

"I think I could lend a hand," a voice called out from the mist.

Noko rubbed his eyes and cowered yet again. "It...it...it's you!"

"Yeah, it's me," the voice replied. "Now tell me what to do. I've got this from here..."

GWMAPT

Pearl and Garnet were preparing themselves to expect anything when they charged into the mist. They were not expecting the sudden appearance of several unknown humans and humanoids attacking the Straw Hats...and were CERTAINLY not expecting Jasper to be on the Grand Line.

"What...what is SHE doing here?!" Pearl freaked out.

"Don't know. Don't care. We are clearly needed here, " Garnet told her weary companion.

"After you," Pearl bowed.

The two began to help fight the mist-created apparitions. It was simple at first with the combined might of the Gems and Straw Hats to take down their foes, but with every opponent defeated, the remaining few would grow stronger. Garnet focused her strength to fighting Jasper while Pearl joined Zoro in dueling a man with the smallest sword Pearl had ever seen. He was sharply dressed but Pearl was more focused on his sharp, piercing eyes and his flawless technique.

"You don't look like a duelist, girlie," Zoro gritted as he dodged the man's attacks. It seemed as if he didn't recognize Pearl...again.

"Sorry to disappoint," Pearl deflected a blow from him herself. "A friend of yours?"

"I don't remember him as a friend...but I'd know him from anywhere," Zoro growled. **"Oni Giri!"**

With great force, Zoro knocked his opponent back, but it was not enough to cause him to disappear. However, it gave Zoro a moment to explain to Pearl who they were facing. "This man is the greatest swordsman in the world: 'Hawk Eyes' Mihawk. Ever since I started training, I knew he was the man I would have to surpass...but I can't believe I had the chance to duel him..."

"How do you know that?"

"I don't know why I am telling you this, but my chest...my chest aches when I am near him. I think he gave me this scar..." Zoro pulled down his shirt a bit to show the Gem.

"Then it's time to return the favor," Pearl grinned as the two of them resumed the duel. She was confident that she could out-class any human opponent in this world. She was a Gem warrior, no matter what Homeworld told her she had to be. However, even Pearl was having trouble keeping up with the swordsman. No matter how precise her attacks were, he was always there to counter her. It was starting to get to Pearl that this one human could be so proficient in the art of swordplay even while using a blade smaller than her finger.

She was starting to get frustrated and it showed.

"You fight well," the man complimented her. "But you will never win this fight."

"Oh?! What makes you say that, human?!" Pearl roared as she continued her attack.

"You have three fatal flaws that hold you back," he grinned. "Your first is your dismissal of humans in battle. Look at me. I have only my technique. Not even with your years on the battlefield can you hold a candle to me!"

"How...how do you know about that?!" Pearl asked, now even more enraged than before.

"I have ways of knowing. The war leads to my second point: you let the peaceful times allow you to grow soft and weak. That is why you were never able to rise above someone like Rose Quartz!" Mihawk continued, using his sword to knock Zoro back to face Pearl alone.

"You know nothing of Rose Quartz! Don't you dare utter her name!" Pearl screamed. Her form was no longer graceful, but rather erratic and desperately. With a single stroke, Mihawk caused her to fall to the ground. He stepped on her and grabbed the giant, black sword that he kept on his back.

"Your final flaw is this: you throw away your advantages in battle when you are fluster and overwhelmed. Had you been more focused, you might have overpowered me...but instead, I find you under my boot. A pity that such a warrior as you would fall to a human like me."

"Just...just end it..." Pearl sighed, defeated. "I thank you...for an honorable duel."

"And I to you and your comrade..." Mihawk nodded. He raised his sword to end the duel, but watched as it disappeared in his hands. Slowly, the man faded away, leaving Pearl and Zoro confused and broken.

"What...? He wasn't...wasn't real!" Pearl was amazed. She wasn't

bested by a human...but rather than a pale imitation of a human. All that Pearl could think about was the real man's true strength.

If faced with the real Mihawk, could she defeat him? Was she really as flawed as he said? How had he known so much about her to profile her so accurately?

Pearl received her answer by the disappearance of the mist surrounding them. A strong wind was blowing in their faces, causing Pearl to squint to find the cause. Finally, she locked eyes with a very welcomed sight:

"Amethyst!" Pearl exclaimed.

"What could I say? I wasn't about to let all you crazy people have all the fun!" Amethyst laughed. Near her were Steven, Greg, Connie, Genevieve, and the boy who started this mess. The purple Gem was twirling her whip at incredible speeds to blow the mist away, revealing the giant seahorse. If there was any doubt that the creature was using the mist to siphon the memories of the Straw Hats, one look at the creature would remove it. It had quadrupled in size and was now truly a giant beast. "Woah! That thing is huge!"

"Is that a floating seahorse?" Luffy asked in awe. "That looks so cool!"

"Where did that thing come from?!" Nami asked frantically. "And where am I?"

"And where am I? This doesn't look like Homeworld..." Peridot mused as she glanced around. Then she stopped as she looked at her body. "WHERE ARE MY LIMB ENHANCERS?!"

"The seahorse must have absorbed a lot of memories during the fighting," Garnet pointed out. "It seems like our friends barely remember anything outside of their core memories. We need to end this."

"But we don't know how to remove the memories!" Pearl pointed out. "If we can't get them out, what is to say that everyone will be stuck not knowing who they were before today!"

"Wait!" Steven called out. "We can help! We know what's going on!"

"The seahorse is trying to get back its memories by stealing ours! It tried to soothe us into docility first, but Robin stopped it before it could do anything. That's when she switched tactics!" Connie explained to them.

"Plus it gave back a few years worth of memories back when it got hit!" Greg added.

"Basically, hit that seahorse with all of your might and pop it like a piñata," Genevieve summarized for them. "Otherwise, we are going to have to face those people again."

"But don't kill her!" Noko begged. "She has good intentions...but isn't expressing them in the best way! I know I have no right to ask anything of you, but please!"

"I already told you guys, I've got this!" Amethyst nodded. "Think of this as me saying sorry, Steven. If this doesn't work, I can't wait to get to know you."

"I can't wait for it either," Steven allowed a small smile. "Be careful."

"I was born careful, little man. Let's do this!" Amethyst curled up into her spin dash and shot herself directly at Tatsu. "I've got some major anger to take out on a seahorse! Gah!"

"Amethyst! Don't do it! Your body can't take much more damage!" Pearl called to her.

"This is what Amethyst wants," Garnet folded her arms. "It's what OUR Amethyst wants."

The seahorse, seeing the incoming attack, tried to move out of the way as fast as she could. However, she had become so corpulent that it was near impossible for Amethyst not to hit her. She attempted to launch another round of her memory mist at her, but Amethyst charged directly through it. Finally, she struck the skin of the seahorse with all of her might. She bounced off and on her body with such force that one practically see the deflation of her stomach occur in front of their eyes.

As this was occurring, the Straw Hats slowly began to rub their eyes and appreciate the sight that was occurring above them more and more with each passing minute. Pearl and Garnet watched as recognition appeared on their faces with every strike that Amethyst landed. "She's doing it!" Pearl whispered.

"Let's just hope that she doesn't overdo it."

After several minutes of striking, Tatsu was slowly shriveling up to her original size. Amethyst, still attacking with all of her might, did not slow down. Finally, she used all of her energy to land one last blow. Before they could process what was happening, the pirates and Gems down below watched as Tatsu disappeared away into seeming nothingness. Noko, for his part, was the only one to yell out in sadness. Grabbing something from the air, Amethyst weakly plummeted down to the ground, only to be caught by Petrea before she could hurt herself further.

"Careful there, Amethyst. The last thing we want is for you to retreat into your gem again," she gently told her. "You did it, you crazy Gem."

"This is...wait, I did...didn't I?" Amethyst started to laugh in Petrea's arms. "I DID IT! I CAN REMEMBER WHO I AM! THANK YOU, CHOCOLATE GIRL!"

As Petrea landed, everyone surrounded the pair. Nearly everyone looked utterly battered, beaten, and bruised from the fighting. However, it seemed like everyone was finally in good spirits again. Steven ran like lightning over to Amethyst to give her a giant hug, but she beat him to the punch.

"Steven! It's okay! I remember who you are! I remember everything! I..." Amethyst's smile disappeared as her eyes widened in horror. "I remember everything..."

"It's fine, Amethyst! Really, it is," Steven patted her back. "You couldn't help it. I'm sorry you were so sad."

"Well, I'm sorry that I made you sad!" Amethyst countered. "Lost memories or not, I never want to see you this upset again! You know

I'm the fun one!"

The two shared a small laugh before Steven pulled away. He saw Noko standing by himself away from the crowd. He looked miserable. Steven walked over to him and nudged him in the shoulder. "Noko, I'm really sorry about Tatsu...are you okay?"

"I'll be fine, Steven," Noko sighed. "It needed to be done. I just...I just wanted to save her as thanks for saving me. Something inside of her wanted me to live three days ago...and I'll never be able to repay her for it. It doesn't make up for all the trouble I caused you guys, but mom always told me never to lie."

"Yeah...about that," Amethyst coughed loudly. "I kinda have some really big news to share with you guys. Like, REALLY big news."

"What is it?" Steven asked.

Amethyst produced the small object she grabbed from the sky. It was a rectangular red gemstone. Pearl and Garnet immediately stopped what they were doing and rushed over to their friend. "No...no, it can't be..."

"It's not possible..." Garnet took a deep breath, clearly taken back and surprised.

"What isn't possible?" Nami asked, clutching her arm that was bruised fighting the Arlong facsimile. "What is that thing...and is it valuable?"

"Navigator Nami, this...this is the gemstone of an old friend: Bixbite," Garnet exclaimed carefully as she examined the gemstone. She immediately put it into a bubble and let it float beside her. "She was a Crystal Gem in the Gem War against Homeworld...but she vanished hundreds of years ago."

"She DID have a Rifting Stone on her on the chance that her mission to retrieve that spire layout failed..." Pearl started to pace around. "But I always assumed she perished in battle or became Corrupted like the others..."

"Guess you were right about that last one, Pearl," Amethyst looked

at the gemstone locked away in the bubble.

"This explains so much," Pearl whispered frantically. "And yet, it raises so many further questions!"

"So Tatsu wasn't a normal seahorse?" Usopp asked. "Tatsu...was a Gem?"

"What's a 'Gem?'" Noko asked. "How...how is that crystal Tatsu?"

"Little boy, it is hard to explain, but I think I put the pieces together. Bixbite...or Tatsu, if you'd prefer, did not come from this dimension. She was a Gem warrior from the Gem Homeworld. She was a master infiltrator and spy for our leader, Rose Quartz," Garnet explained to everyone. "She had the ability to put other Gems in a state of soothing in order to make it easier for her to finish her missions undetected. However, it appears that she was caught in the Diamonds' last-ditch effort to ruin our planet. Rather than accept defeat, Yellow Diamond used a weapon on our planet to cause any Gems not protected by the bubble of Rose Quartz to...to become mentally corrupted. It didn't matter which side they were on. Their physical forms could no longer retain a humanoid form and slowly they descended into madness..."

"Yellow Diamond did that?" Peridot whispered to herself. "She did that to Gems under her own protection?"

"She did. What must have happened is this: Bixbite tried to escape the assault but was too late in her efforts. She must have tried to create a rift at the exact moment the Diamonds fired their weapon and ended up here on the Grand Line," Pearl rubbed her hands through her hair. "It's not unheard of. We encountered several Corrupt Gems in another dimension in our quest to return Steven back home, but I assumed they were self-contained to that one spot. I guess Bixbite was the exception to the rule..."

"You said she had the power to soothe other Gems?" Sanji folded his arms and nodded. "That explains how a seahorse could have those kind of powers."

"And how she knew your mom's shield!" Chopper pointed to Steven.

"It also explains the legends behind this area," Robin looked at the gemstone curiously. "You Gems have an extraordinary long lifespan and if our Bixbite here were truly amnesiac, it must have tried for years to figure out who she was by absorbing memories."

"So Tatsu...is an alien rock and not a seahorse?" Noko asked.
"Does that mean she's alive in that bubble?"

"She is," Pearl nodded. "Normally, we would send her to our Burning Room for storage until we could find a way to reverse the damages done by the Diamonds, but we can't access the Temple. I'll put her away for safekeeping."

"Wait! Could...could I keep her? I know she was your friend, but she was mine too," Noko begged. "I guess a bit of Bixbite was still inside of Tatsu when she saved me...and I never truly got to thank her."

"It's not safe for you to take a bubbled Gem with you to...to wherever it is that you live," Pearl shook her head. "I'm going to place her into my gemstone until we can return home. She will be safe there and secured. One day, if we are able to undo the damages, I will tell her about you and try my best to find you so you can do that in person. Until then, I hope that you can understand. If she got loose, she would continue to drain the memories of anyone she encountered along the way."

"I...I guess," Noko sighed. "You'll take care of her?"

"I give you my word," Pearl said as she placed the bubbled Gem inside of her forehead.

"That...that was nasty," Damian gagged.

"I..." Noko started before getting interrupted by a loud, female voice.

"Noko! There you are!" a woman running toward them from the direction of the village shouted. She looked very similar to Noko but was much older. The boy stopped talking and looked shocked to see her.

"Mom? Mom!" Noko ran to her. "Oh, mom! I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry that everything happened to you!"

"Shhh. Don't you worry yourself, Noko," his mother calmed him down. "Everything is okay and we are all fine. In fact, everything is going to be okay. The second this fog lifted away, I knew I needed to find you. I'm thankful you weren't too far out into these terrible woods."

"You're okay?" Noko asked.

"I am," she nodded. "Come on, let's get you back to the others. We finally have help to get us off of this island. I reckon you all should come too." The woman pointed to the Straw Hats and Gems.

"If you are talking about the ship in the distance, that would be ours," Nami admitted. "But I don't see why we can't help you folks out."

"It'll be tight, but we can make it work," Luffy agreed, who had just accepted his hat back from Connie.

"Oh, I wasn't referring to you. A man arrived on the island that said he was here to help us out. He told us he has been looking for our ship and found us not too long ago," Noko's mother explained. "He's a very nice man who was very patient with us and our...temporary condition..."

"Well, there you go!" Luffy smiled. "A happy ending for everyone! Let's go meet him!"

"Is that wise?" Sanji asked. "I mean, this has 'bad idea' written all over it..."

"I'm the captain and I make the rules!" Luffy laughed as he ran toward the village with all of his might.

"My, he's an enthusiastic one," Noko's mother chuckled. "Come on, Noko. Let's get moving."

"Yes, mom," he nodded. Then he turned around and bowed to the pirates. "Thank you again for saving us...saving me. I'm sorry for everything I caused and I hope one day you can forgive me."

"Apology accepted, little man," Garnet gave him a thumbs up. "Let's go follow Pirate Captain Luffy and get this over with so we can all

get off of this island."

"Agreed!" everyone nodded at once.

The group made their way towards the village, but Peridot motioned for Amethyst to remain behind for a moment. "Look...Amethyst...I am not the best at apologies and...and I know it was logical to tell you everything about Rose, but it wasn't right. I hurt you Amethyst and I am sorry for that. I know that..."

"Dude, just stop," Amethyst smiled. "I forgive you, P-Diddy. Everything is A-OK in my book."

"You have a book?" Peridot looked around. "Produce it! I would like to read the book!"

"It's an expression, dumb-dumb! Gosh, you're a riot!" the Gem started to laugh. "Come on already! The sooner we get back to the ship, the sooner lover boy will make us food!"

"I...whatever you say, Amethyst," Peridot gave a tiny smile. "Whatever you say."

As Peridot caught up with the others, Robin walked beside her. "I assume Miss Amethyst accepted your apology?"

"She did, even though I don't deserve it," Peridot sighed. "I forced her into an emotional state and..."

"And you were sorry for it," Robin put her hand on her shoulder. "You have a lot of growing, Peridot, but I can see the goodness in you too."

"You have been talking to Steven, haven't you?"

"Perhaps I have," she chuckled. "Perhaps I..." Robin immediately stopped laughing when she saw the sight in front of her eyes.

They had reached the village and saw all of the passengers of the "Minnow" gathered around a very tall man. He had black hair and was wearing a sleep mask on top of his head. The white vest he was wearing covered up a navy blue shirt and a yellow tie. Luffy was

talking to him enthusiastically. Though the others had walked closer to them, Robin had stopped. She was frozen in place. Peridot, sensing the tension coming off of her friend, nudged her to snap her out of it.

"Hey! Hey, Robin? Peridot to Robin? What is it? Do you know that clod?" Peridot asked.

"I...I do," Robin said in horror. "I...how is he here?! Why is he here?!"

"Who is he?"

"That, Peridot, is Admiral Aokiji of the Marines...and the person who I am most terrified of in this world."

At the mention of his name, the man looked up and smiled at her. He stopped his conversation with Luffy and the passengers and walked toward the Gem and the archaeologist. He stopped right in front of them, showcasing his large height. "Hello, Nico Robin. My, how you've grown."

The Blue Pheasant

Robin could not get her feet to move properly. She began to breathe in and out in a fast, rhythmic motion. Sweat began to form on her brow. It was unthinkable...

Admiral Aokiji was here. On this island. Talking to her captain. Walking toward her.

As proven roughly a half hour before, Aokiji was literally the representation of all of her fears and the source of nearly every terrible thing that has happened in her life. He gave her the chance to live and have a normal life after the Buster Call was deployed on her home, but what had that small act of kindness caused her? Despite being let go, she was still given her incredibly high bounty and every person she came to for aid turned her away or tried to turn her in.

Aokiji was the reason she started to hate humanity. Aokiji was the reason why she doubted the goodness of the world. Aokiji was the reason she questioned whether being alive was even worth it on her deepest, darkest days. For many years, the only thing that kept Robin going was the desire to learn more about the Void Century. Knowledge was prioritized over her own life. This is the way Robin lived her life day in and day out...

Until fate introduced her to the two most important people of her life: Monkey D. Luffy and Steven Universe.

Luffy had a childlike innocence about him that just made you truly believe that he believed in you. Meeting him was unlike anything that she had ever encountered. Here he was: a pirate so set on his ideals that he would keep his focus on his dream while taking the time to save a princess and her people just because it was the right thing to do. He seemingly had no chance to take on Crocodile and yet made it his mission to bring him down. She was drawn to his will, his heart, and his determination.

Steven Universe was a different matter. While Luffy cared for every

member of his crew, Steven just cared. He was empathy personified. He did not judge you by your actions, but rather by your potential. Robin might have had a part in the attempted takeover of Alabasta, but the fact that she gave him a towel proved to the boy that there was "good" in her. It was a naïve way of looking at the world in many respects, yet he managed to have a surprising track record for reaching people. He managed to reform Miss Valentine by complimenting her chocolate, Mr. 5 by standing up for him in front of Mr. 3, and Miss Goldenweek by the sheer virtue of believing in her. He managed to get Marines and pirates to stay civil with each other for almost a week in another dimension. He put aside his own anxiety and fears of being away from his family to help the people of Alabasta out because they needed all the help that they could.

The boy was a miracle.

It was not just him. Connie shared a similar output on life and it showed. Robin was not lying to her when she said that the book of horror and mysteries she purchased for her was one of her most prized possessions in life. Connie went out of her way to try to get to know her for no reason besides the fact that she wanted to. In addition, Peridot was also latching onto her. The Gem was unfamiliar to most of her surroundings and found herself in a similar situation that Robin did upon stowing away on the Going Merry. It was almost amusing to think that she was looking up to her in any capacity. It made her feel...wanted.

But Aokiji flushed all of those feelings away. Aokiji made her feel hated and hunted. Aokiji made her feel like she was nothing. Aokiji reminded her that, at one point, she wanted to die.

"Robin? Robin? Are your audio receptors working?" Peridot poked her shoulder. "THIS human makes you feel...afraid?"

"Yes..." Robin gulped. "This man...this man is an admiral..."

"So you have mentioned," Peridot looked back and forth from the human to Robin. "I fail to see why that should make you feel fear..."

"Peridot, how...how can I put this?" Robin stammered, never letting her eyes off of Aokiji. "I assume Homeworld has ranks...like your

Diamond?"

"Affirmative," Peridot nodded as she examined the man, who seemed more bemused by the green Gem than anything. By this point, the Straw Hats, Gems, and stranded passengers were now listening in themselves to the conversation.

"An admiral is the highest rank a member of the Marines can achieve. It is right below Fleet Admiral Sengoku, who is the equivalent to your Yellow Diamond," Robin began to pant. "There are three admirals all together: Aokiji the Blue Pheasant, Aikanu the Red Dog, and Kizaru the Yellow Monkey. They are the strongest beings in the Marines...and with good reason..."

Peridot, who had started to make the connection to Homeworld in her head, thought about it for a moment and stopped where she stood. She locked eyes with the man, who gave her a small nod. "Howdy," he said in a bored voice.

"GAH! THIS PHEASANT IS GOING TO SHATTER ME!" Peridot ran over to Steven, who was looking rather confused. "STEVEN, SAVE ME!"

"Wha...? What's going on?" Steven frowned. Robin looked on in fear as Steven did the one thing she prayed he would not do: he walked up to Aokiji and extended his hand. "Um...hi there, Mr. Blue Pheasant, sir. My name is Steven..."

"STEVEN!" the Straw Hats and Gems yelled out in unison.

Aokiji, staring down at the hand in bemusement, chuckled and accepted it. "It's nice to finally meet the 'Tiger Millionaire' in person. You seem pretty chill compared to your friends."

"Thanks!" Steven smiled. "So, you are a sea cop too? Do you know Smoker and Tashigi?"

"Steven!" Robin got in front of the youth, standing between the two of them. "Stay back! Do not talk to this man! Do not tell him anything!"

"You know him?" Steven pointed to Aokiji.

"We met once when she was a girl. Nico Robin, you need to calm down. I'm not here to start trouble...actually, I really don't want to start anything," Aokiji yawned and laid down on the ground. "I'm too beat."

"...what?" Usopp asked in shock. "You're joking...right?"

"Nah. I...oh, wait," Aokiji sighed and forced himself up back up. "That took more effort than I was expecting."

"...how lazy can a person be?" Genevieve shook her head. "That's embarrassing."

"...that's the pot calling the kettle black..." Nami muttered. "...though you're right. You can't seriously be that high-ranking of a Marine acting like this."

"I live by the model of 'Lazy Justice,'" Aokiji shrugged. Then he yawned and gave Nami a once over. "Wow, you're really sexy. Heck, there are a LOT of sexy girls here. Are any of you free later?"

"...you aren't really helping your case," Nami groaned, doing everything in her power not to hit the man. "Anyway, why would an admiral from the Marines be here on this island?"

"Don't you have more serious criminals to catch?!" Usopp added.

"As I've tried telling you, I'm not here to arrest you. I'm here for two reasons. First, I wanted to confirm that Nico Robin has been traveling with you all. She kind of disappeared after the Alabasta incident and Smoker either didn't know where you were or wouldn't say it...he doesn't like talking about Alabasta after his promotion."

"So you do know Smoker!" Steven smiled.

"Sure do. Funny you should ask about him. He claimed that you wouldn't be seen again, Tiger Millionaire. He was very confident about that...and yet, here you are," Aokiji shrugged.

"Hey!" a small boy from the crowd of roughly thirty people keeping their distance yelled. "I thought you were here to save us from that creep Noko!"

Robin, managing to take her eyes off of Aokiji for a moment, looked into the crowd of the passengers from the "Minnow" and found Noko. It was amazing to think that a mere hour ago he was their enemy. Now? Now he was just a shy boy hiding behind his mother trying to ignore the taunting of another boy. The look on his mother's face was a mixture of sadness and anger.

"Zachary, hold your tongue!" the youth's mother scolded him. "You do not talk to a Marine like that!"

"But it's true! It's all Noko's fault that we are stuck here and it's all..." the boy named Zachary began before getting cut off.

"That's enough," Aokiji silenced him. He began to walk over to the crowd, cracking his neck as he did so. "You should listen to your mother. Tell me, which one of you is Noko?"

"That's him!" Zachary pointed to the cowering boy. Sighing, Noko left his mother's side and met Aokiji at the head of the crowd.

"Young man, why aren't you defending yourself?" Aokiji asked. "Doesn't it hurt knowing he blames you for this?"

"It's true," Noko kept his face down. "If Tatsu didn't save me, nobody would have lost their memories..."

"But he's blaming you for everything, not just the memories," Aokiji pointed out.

"I've just grown used to it..." Noko bit his lip, seemingly defeated. "It's like this at home. Why shouldn't it be different here?"

"So, you know that boy?"

"He's from my village..." Noko sighed. "He and the other kids always make fun of me because of my father..."

"...you have your father's face; did you know that?" Aokiji commented. Noko's face lit up with recognition. "Yes, I'm aware of your father and the Iron Grenadier Pirates. Tell me, why didn't you join them? I'm sure you could have been a cabin boy."

"I...I didn't want to be a pirate," Noko blinked. "Somebody needed to stay with mom. I didn't want to disappoint her."

"A damn good answer," Aokiji ruffled the boys hair. He then made his way over to Zachary and bent down to meet him on his own level. "Hear that? He doesn't want to be a pirate. Don't make fun of him again. Who cares if his father is a pirate? All that matters is who he is, and anyone who cares that much for his mother can't be that bad."

"I...what?! But he ate a Devil Fruit! He's a freak!" Zachary blurted out.

"...you have a problem with Devil Fruits?" Aokiji shrugged. "I guess you all won't need my help then after all. Oh well."

"No! Please, Admiral Aokiji! Ignore my son! He doesn't know what he is saying!" Zachary's mother chimed in. "Please help us!"

The Marine scratched his head and frowned. "Fine...I guess I'll help. But I'd like you all to do something for me."

"Anything!" the crowd cried.

"This boy," Aokiji pointed to Noko. "Let him be. He isn't a freak and he isn't his father. Let him and his mother enjoy themselves. They didn't cause this and they don't deserve to be ostracized for it. In my experience, doing what you are doing can lead to some serious consequences down the road." As he said that, Aokiji shot a look over to Robin, who stepped back in shock.

"Not a problem!" a man, who appeared to be the captain of the doomed vessel, spoke for everyone. He then turned to Zachary and pointed to Noko. "You should apologize to him, young man."

"I...I'm sorry," he muttered. Aokiji gave a small cough, prompting the boy's eyes to widen with fear. "I'm sorry, Noko! I was wrong and I promise you I won't bully you again!"

"Hrmph...acceptable," Aokiji shrugged. "Come on, everyone. Follow me to the ocean."

"Wait! Don't follow him! He's a Marine!" Luffy called out to the people before they could react to Aokiji's request.

"...and that's bad because...?" the captain of the "Minnow" asked.

Luffy opened his mouth to argue, but quickly shut it. "Oh. Wait...the Marines are usually the bad guys...but to everyone else, they are the good guys...so...okay! Never mind! My bad!"

With that, all of the shipwrecked passengers began to follow Aokiji away from the wrecked village they called home during their stay on the island. As they did so, the Straw Hats and Gems stayed back for a moment.

"...I don't like this," Pearl shook her head. "I do not like this one bit."

"I've seen that man once before...in a possible future," Garnet stared out at the man leading the procession of people toward the opposite side of the ocean where Merry was docked. "It was why I wanted to have us leave the Davy Back Fight so suddenly."

"What...what did you see?" Usopp asked.

"Pain," Garnet frowned. "Lots of pain."

"Then what are we waiting for?! We should leave...now!" Usopp started to freak out. "He might be an idiot, but he is still an admiral! We should run back to the Merry and leave while he is distracted!"

"It won't help," Robin whispered. "He'll find us. There is nothing we can do..."

"Robin?" Steven asked, clearly concerned for his friend. "Are...are you okay?"

"No...no, I am not okay," Robin gulped. "I...we should just follow him. You need to see what he is about to do."

"But why?" Zoro asked. "If this guy freaks you out so much, why should we follow him?"

"So you can know why I am afraid," Robin explained. "So you know

why he is an admiral. I know what he is about to do...and I know that it would be wise for you to see it as well."

With that, Robin began to follow after Aokiji. She was in a haze. She did know what Aokiji's true intentions were yet, but she knew that nothing good could come of this encounter. This day was already one of the most difficult days for her crew...this would only make things worse for them.

"...does anyone else feel that sense of foreboding?" Robin heard Greg say. "Because I've got a really bad feeling about this..."

"If he's going to help Noko and the others, he can't be that bad!" Steven replied to him. "Just give him a chance!"

'Steven, your optimism is to be commended...but it is misguided...' Robin thought to herself.

GWMAPT

After following the admiral to the other side of the island, the crew warily watched as Aokiji gazed out to the sea and pointed in a random direction. "There is an island in the nearby archipelago that hosts a tribe of villagers. They have medical supplies and access to a Den Den Mushi. They can contact the nearby G-8 Marine base, who can get you all the help you need."

"That's very helpful...but how are we going to get there? Where is your ship?" the captain inquired.

"My ride is only for one I'm afraid," Aokiji bent down and put his hand in the ocean water. "Stay back...**Ice Age!**"

Before their eyes, the pirates watched as a giant stretch of ocean turned into solid ice. It extended far beyond their vision and seemingly out of the Empyrean Section in its entirety. The sight was enough to blow the Straw Hats out of the water, but they were not the only ones to be amazed.

"He...he froze the ocean?!" Pearl freaked out. "How can a human even do that?!"

"This is bad," Garnet stared down at her hands, looking at the two separate gemstones that were embedded in them. "The amount of power it would take to freeze an entire body of water is...nearly impossible to calculate."

"Are you saying Sapphire couldn't push herself to do that?" Amethyst asked.

"...I don't know, Amethyst...I don't know."

Though the Crystal Gems were clearly concerned, there was one Gem who seemed more excited than nervous:

"Wow! Mr. Aokiji, that is so cool! How did you do that?!" Steven asked excitedly.

"I ate the Ice Ice Fruit, kid," Aokiji replied. He then turned to the crowd. "This should last about a week. Now, I'm assuming you don't have much food or water. Monkey D. Luffy, do you have any spare food that you would be willing to part with? I can cover the cost to replace it."

"...did...did he just offer to PAY US?!" Petrea asked incredulously. "What the hell is going on today?!"

"Uh...sure!" Luffy nodded. "Yeah, I can spare a little food for these guys! No problem!"

"Hold on!" Chopper interjected. "These people have been on this island for three days without proper care! They can't leave now! They need to be examined and checked up!"

"Hmm...I guess I didn't think about that..." Aokiji tapped his finger to his chin.

"Allow me, ice guy," Amethyst stepped forward and cracked her knuckles. "Let me show you how a Crystal Gem gets it done!"

The passengers of the "Minnow" were blown away by what they saw next. They were already freaking out over the power of the admiral, but Amethyst proceeded to turn herself into a giant military transport helicopter large enough to carry all thirty passengers of the ship.

What was unnerving was that her face adorned the front of the vehicle. Aokiji, for his part, narrowed his eyes but otherwise showed no new emotions.

"I can get you over to that island in no time at all!" Amethyst laughed. "Hop on, folks!"

"...this...this seems wrong," the captain frowned and stepped back. "How...how did you do that?"

"It's a Gem thing. Shapeshifting is easy when your body is just a projection!" Amethyst explained while starting her propellers. "Come on! Don't you guys need medical attention or something?"

"...I don't know how comfortable I feel about letting my charges ride...uh...you?" the captain scratched his head.

"I can vouch for her," Noko spoke up. "I trust Amethyst."

"That sounds good enough for me," Aokiji yawned. "Get going before you guys starve. I think our 'Gem' will take good care of you. Just follow the ice path and you'll be fine."

"Roger! All aboard the Amethyst Express!" Amethyst announced.

"...that's what you say for a train, Amethyst," Greg shook his head.

"Whatever! Come on! I've got things I'd like to do today!" Amethyst rolled her eyes.

The passengers of the "Minnow" boarded Amethyst one by one. The last one to do so was Noko, who took the moment to thank the pirates one final time. As soon as he boarded the Gem, she took off to the nearby island, following the icy path Aokiji created. The pirates and Gems watched as Amethyst disappeared into the distance, her cargo safely in tow.

"...if Amethyst could have done that, why didn't she shapeshift into that when we needed to cross that river in Alabasta?" Nami asked.

"It's best not to question what goes on in Amethyst's mind," Garnet frowned. "It won't get you anywhere."

"Regardless, that was some quick thinking on her part," Aokiji sat back down on the ground and stretched out. "I didn't take that into consideration. You 'Gems' can think on your feet."

The Straw Hats returned their attention back to the man who made Robin quiver in her shoes. This Marine was so calm and lazy, it was unthinkable that he was an admiral. Yet, he had power to freeze the ocean. Who was this man? Why was Robin so afraid of him? More importantly, was there anything that he wasn't telling them?

Of course, these were not questions that Steven Universe was thinking.

"That was so cool how you froze the ocean like that!" Steven ran over to Aokiji. "You must be super strong!"

"Eh, I'm too modest to care about stuff like that," Aokiji closed his eyes.

"It was a really good idea to try to help the people," Steven continued. "I'm sorry it didn't work..."

"All that matters is the people are going to be safe. I don't care if I got upstaged by a purple woman," Aokiji replied. "That's the kind of Justice I stand for."

Steven turned to Robin and frowned. "Robin, he seems like a really nice guy. He helped those people and doesn't seem like he wants to hurt us. Why are you so afraid of him?"

"Yeah! If he isn't here for you, then he seems okay!" Luffy nodded. "I wish most of the Marines I met were more like you!"

The comment caused Aokiji to merely stare at Luffy and Steven. It took Luffy a moment, but he finally took notice of it and cocked his head in confusion. "...what? Do I have something on my head?"

"Hmm...it is hard to put in words..." Aokiji scratched his head. "You really are the splitting image of your grandfather...and that's what worries me. I don't know if you are absentminded, open-minded, or some combination of both."

"You know gramps?!" Luffy began to freak out.

"You mean the human who threw cannonballs at us?" Pearl asked.
"Why is that relevant?"

"It's relevant because you all have shown me that there is a lot to be worried about here. Garp might be a wild card, but he's a Marine. You? I don't know if I can figure you all out," Aokiji stood up and gazed over to Nico Robin. "I was being honest when I said my main reason for being here was to confirm that Robin was traveling with you all...but I think it would be better if I killed all of you here and now."

"What?!" Steven took a step backwards. "You can't mean that!"

"What do you mean by that?!" Zoro called out. "Why the sudden change in attitude?!"

"I mean that you guys are more of a threat than the World Government believes you to be. Reading between the lines of Commodore Smoker's report about the Alabasta incident, learning that you all have stopped a mythological creature that has plagued this area since well before my own birth, seeing your determination as a whole, and witnessing that 'Gem's' display of potential...all it tells me is that this group as a whole is shaping to become an actual threat to the world," Aokiji explained to the increasingly worried pirate band.

"But...but we help people! We saved Alabasta! We took down Baroque Works! We stopped the hippo guy!" Steven pleaded to the admiral. "The Straw Hats are good people with good intentions! Really, they are! You have to believe me, sir!"

"Good intentions aside, being considered a 'good' person is subjective. Yes, your group has currently limited itself to fighting other pirate groups, but what happens when you reach a situation that forces you to come in direct confrontation with the World Government? What happens when your goals are counter to ours?"

"I can assure you, admiral, that despite the appearance of piracy, we have the best interests of the people in mind!" Pearl interjected.

"We are not here to cause a conflict or start a revolution or whatever else you believe that this group is capable of! Please reconsider your threat before this escalates any further!"

"Trust me; you don't want that to happen," Garnet cracked her knuckles.

Aokiji frowned and shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't allow that to happen. Since the time you received your first bounty to this moment, your group has grown far more dangerous than anyone is giving you credit for. I hear a lot of things when I am forced to make reports to the Gorosei, and I know more than I let on. You caused them to be afraid of something...I don't know what and, honestly, I don't care."

"The Government is afraid of us?" Nami asked. "I thought you just said they aren't taking us seriously."

"Not you. Them," Aokiji pointed to Garnet, Peridot, and Pearl. "I am not sure what you did to cause them to discuss things in hushed tones, but you did something alright."

"That's preposterous!" Pearl laughed in a condescending way. "We haven't even done ANYTHING beyond assist in defeating that terrible Crocodile...and that horrible Davy Back Fight yesterday..."

"Again, I don't know nor care about the why. All I know is that the word 'Gem' has been bandied about and even Fleet Admiral Sengoku doesn't know why. The only people who I suspect that knows what is going on are Commodore Smoker and Ensign Tashigi, but they aren't talking to anyone about what happened in Alabasta..." Aokiji continued. "I wasn't sure about that, but the Universe boy seems to know them. You were at Alabasta, you know Smoker, and you call yourselves 'Gems.' It stands to reason that you all are a threat."

"But the Gems aren't here to cause trouble!" Steven argued. "They are here because of my birthday! We weren't even going to be staying long! We..."

"It doesn't matter what your intentions were; all that matters is that I

found you and I have deemed this group a threat. There is even talk to increase the bounty of your apparent ally Sardonyx if she doesn't appear soon...who I assume you can call at any given moment. Add in the known threat that Nico Robin poses and you have yourself a global catastrophe just waiting to happen."

"YOU AREN'T TAKING ROBIN ANYWHERE!" Luffy roared.

"Nico Robin has had a bounty on her head since she was eight years old, did you know that? Your bounty is not only a reflection of your combat ability, but to the threat that you pose to the world. She is declared to be one of the biggest threats the world has ever known. She betrayed her parents and left them to die...she truly is a survivor and a stain that just cannot be removed."

"Stop it!" Connie ran forward. "Robin is better than you give her credit for! We know that something happened in Ohara all those years ago, but who says that Robin did those things? Who says that it wasn't covered up?!"

"I do because I was there," Aokiji folded his arms. "I was there when Ohara burned. I was there when Robin fled. I know what she is capable of and what she can do. Every group that Nico Robin has ever been a part of has ended up utterly annihilated leaving Robin as the sole survivor."

"Well, what about Baroque Works?!" Petrea joined in. "Damian, Genevieve, and I are just fine! She might have a dark past of some kind, but who cares?!"

"Petrea, don't provoke the admiral!" Damian whispered.

"I'll do what I want! She has earned my friendship and I will defend her with my life! Besides, I don't even live here anymore! I don't recognize the authority of the World Government, the Marines, or any of their watchdogs anymore!"

"I'd give my life for Robin too!" Luffy added. "If you want her, you'll have to come through me!"

"And me," Zoro drew his swords, stepping in front of Robin.

"If you even think of harming Robin-chan, I'll shove my foot so far up your ass it..." Sanji began before looking over to Garnet and Pearl. "Well, you get the idea!"

"I too will defend Robin from you!" Peridot nodded, placing her arms in front of the stunned woman. Then she snapped her fingers in the direction of Garnet and Pearl. "Crystal Gems, assemble! Defend your leader!"

"You aren't our leader," Garnet muttered as she formed her gauntlets. "But we will defend you, Nico Robin. Steven, get your father and Connie away from here! Now!"

"But I want to help!" Steven demanded.

"Think of the others! They need you more than we do! Now go!" Garnet ordered.

"It's okay, Garnet. I can fight my own battles!" Robin wiped away a single tear at the sign of devotion her friends were displaying. In an instant, her face turned bright red and anger flared from it. "You dare come here and look for me?! You want to arrest me? You want to kill me?! I won't let you! **Treinta Fleur!**"

Thirty hands sprang up from the ground where Aokiji was standing and held him in place. The admiral barely registered the attack and looked more uncomfortable than anything. "So...you have earned their trust already...interesting..."

"Not another word! **Clutch!**" Robin spat out venomously.

Before their eyes, the pirates and Gems witnessed Aokiji crumble to bits. The sight deeply affected the impressionable Steven and Connie, while freaking out Chopper. "GAH! SHE KILLED HIM!"

"He isn't dead!" Robin called to them. "We need to leave...now!"

"That human is clearly dead!" Peridot pointed to the pile of ice on the ground. "You shattered him into a million pieces!"

"No...no, she didn't!" Pearl drew her staff and pointed it at the pile. "I read about his Devil Fruit in the book King Nefeltari gave to me! He

can reform indefinitely unless submerged into water!"

"WHAT?!" Usopp yelled in astonishment. "YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS!"

"She's right," the voice of Aokiji spoke as he pieced himself back together before them. "You all don't stand a chance. I truly wasn't planning on killing you all, but you are leaving me with no choice."

Aokiji proceeded to grab a few blades of grass from the ground and threw them in the air. He then proceeded to spit on them, causing the blades to become an actual saber of ice. "**Ice Saber.**"

He went to swipe the blade at Robin, but found it deflected by Zoro. Keeping it in place with his own sword, Sanji rushed over and kicked the blade out of his hand. Seizing the opportunity, Luffy punched the man in his chest as hard as he could. "**Gum Gum Bullet!**"

Unfortunately, the attack left no damage on Aokiji, but it allowed the admiral to grab onto Sanji's leg and Zoro's shoulder. Though not apparent at first, the true purpose of his move was made clear:

Their skin began to freeze wherever they touched him.

"GAH! HE FROZE THEM! WE NEED TO GET THEM SUBMERGED IN WATER FAST BEFORE THE DAMAGE BECOMES PERMANENT!" Chopper wailed as the three of them began to groan in pain.

"He took them down in one attack?!" Nami whispered in shock.

"WE ARE DEAD!" Damian yelled in fear.

"It seems like you've made some loyal friends this time, Robin. It's a shame you haven't changed at all," Aokiji chuckled as he surveyed the damage he inflicted.

"You're wrong! I am a good person! I..." Robin started before getting cut off. Turning most of his body into ice, Aokiji lunged at Robin. However, he was blocked by the familiar pink bubble of Steven Quartz Universe. The boy had ran as fast as he could to get between Robin and Aokiji. "Steven?! What are you doing?! Garnet told you to get out of here!"

"I'm not about to leave my friends!" Steven replied from inside of the bubble. The two watched as ice began to form around their protective sphere. "I don't care what he is saying about you; I still think you are a good person!"

"Steven, you think everyone is a good person," Robin whispered, simultaneously grateful and defeated.

"That's because they are! Some people just don't know it yet!" Steven smiled before wincing. "I...I can hold him!"

"Steven, don't kill yourself for me. You have to think about your father and the Gems...they need you more than I do," Robin shook her head and put her hand on his should. "I'll push you out of the way and..."

"No," Steven took a deep breath. "They might need me...but I need you too!"

The comment took Robin completely off-guard. Before she knew it, tears were starting to fall down her face. Despite facing the embodiment of her fears, she still managed to find comfort in the fact that her friends cared that much for her. There was truth in Aokiji's warnings, but they did not care.

She was a Straw Hat.

Suddenly, the ice stopped forming around the bubble. Robin knew that Aokiji must have given up...but why would he do that? After thinking it over, she concluded that he must be distracted by something else. "Steven, drop the bubble and run!"

"But..."

"DROP THE BUBBLE AND RUN!" Robin yelled frantically.

Overwhelmed by the power of Robin's response, Steven lost control of the bubble and the two of them were treated to an intense sight: Garnet and Pearl fighting Aokiji together. Most of the Straw Hats were running toward the area where the two had defended themselves. Leading the charge was Connie, who wrapped her arms around Steven as tightly as she could.

"Steven! Don't you dare do that again! We thought we were going to lose both of you!" Connie scolded him.

"But Connie, he was going to hurt Robin really badly!" Steven smiled at her before returning his gaze to the dueling Gems. "Amethyst still isn't back?"

"No! We don't know how long they can hold him off!" Petrea shook her head. "This is bad...really bad."

"It's okay! They are the Crystal Gems! They always..." Steven started before watching the chocolatier shake her head.

"Steven, you don't get it. Admirals are incredibly strong. I don't know if the Gems could handle him. His ice powers make him nearly invincible!"

"Then it's a good thing Garnet has ice, fire, and lightning powers!" Steven countered. "I believe in them! I know they can do it!"

"But what if they can't?" Genevieve bit her lip. "What then?"

"Then we pray," Usopp gulped.

GWMAPT

Amethyst was feeling a lot better about the situation that she was in. Since waking up, she had experienced a roller coaster of emotions that left her feeling incredibly down about herself. She had enough self-confidence issues on a normal day, but her actions upon losing her memories had truly hit home. She might not have known it at the time, but she had made the one person she cared about more than anything cry. The fact that Steven would talk to her at all after that was a testament to his kindness.

However, she felt truly useful and appreciated when she delivered the humans to the nearby island. Though initially disturbed, they were incredibly grateful to be rescued so quickly and without any further incident. She could not even stand to be mad at Noko anymore despite him being a catalyst for her internal emotional problems. For his part, he was the most thankful of them all. He was truly sorry for what he did and Amethyst had to admit that she was

touched by it.

Riding off the high of being called their "savior," Amethyst was ready to relax on the Straw Hat ship before returning back to the barn. Of course, that idealistic fantasy was shattered upon seeing what was happening on the island known as Krankor. Pearl and Garnet were engaged in combat with Aokiji. Pearl was going blow for blow with what appeared to be an ice sword, but she was slowing down. It probably had to do with the fight the three of them just had, but Amethyst was not worried. Pearl could trounce the best swordsmen of the world even after facing the toughest Corrupted Gems around. She couldn't tell who was winning this particular fight, but she had to assume that the two of them could handle it.

After all, they were Gems. What human could beat a Gem?

Deciding that upstaging this human once in a day was not enough, Amethyst changed herself from the plane into her favorite form: Purple Puma. The large, hairy, muscular wrestler descended down to the ground at a fast speed and went to slam the ground where Aokiji stood. "Bungacowa!" The intensity of the strike made the pirates jump, but barely fazed Aokiji or her fellow Gems.

"Ah. The other one is here," Aokiji acknowledged her. "The one who popped that giant seahorse."

"You know it!" Amethyst growled as she threw a punch at Aokiji. The admiral sidestepped it and grabbed her arm. He threw her into the ground and started to freeze her arm. Using her good arm, Amethyst summoned a whip and wrapped it around the arm grabbing her's. With a mighty tug, she pulled it off of her and threw him at Garnet.

The Gem fusion charged up her gauntlets with flames and started to pummel Aokiji with all of her might. As the strongest of the Crystal Gems, Pearl and Amethyst could only watch in awe at her attack. If anyone could stop this man, it would be her. Garnet typically did not like to use Ruby's fire techniques without mixing it with Sapphire's ice powers, turning it into lightning, but she made an exception this one time.

"Garnet is giving it her all, isn't she?" Amethyst asked, panting as

she resumed her original form. "Is this guy really THAT tough?"

"He...he is incredible," Pearl gripped onto her staff to retain balance. "He is not even...even that proficient in swordplay, yet his power makes up for it! I don't know how he kept up with me for so long without slowing down!"

"Did you hit him at all?" Amethyst asked, dread sinking into her gemstone.

"Amethyst, he did not even register any blows we landed on him," Pearl shook her head and returned her attention back to Garnet. "But this is different. Garnet isn't holding back. Garnet is going to stop him. Garnet..."

She stopped when she saw exactly what was happening: despite pummeling him with flaming, fusion punches, Aokiji was unfazed by the assault. He took it and yawned. The sight caused Pearl to collapse to the ground, her staff disappearing at the same time. "No...no, it can't be. How...?"

"Garnet?!" Amethyst called out. "Garnet isn't even doing any damage?! How?!"

"You put too much faith in your abilities," Aokiji said as Garnet started to step back. His body started to smoke as it turned into blue ice. He lunged at the Gem and grabbed her. The Gems could only watch in horror as Garnet began to freeze into a solid sheet of ice. "You are strong...too strong for your own good." In a single strike, he shattered the frozen Gem. Unlike Aokiji, she was not rematerializing at all.

Garnet was gone.

"NO!" the Gems screamed in agony. Amethyst couldn't believe what she just witnessed. Outside of their first fight with Jasper, she had never seen Garnet lose. It took a Quartz Soldier to bring her down before after thousands of years of fighting. Yet this human...this human seemingly shattered her in a short fight.

Through her tears, she could hear Steven crying harder than even

she was. This boy had already dealt with one mother figure hurting him today; now he just witnessed another fall before his very eyes. There was no hope now. They would all die here. They would never make it back to Earth. The Cluster would destroy the planet and everyone she knew would be dead.

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" the voice of Straw Hat Luffy snapped her out of it. "LEAVE THEM ALONE!"

The Gem watched as Luffy walked past Aokiji and offered his hand to the fallen Pearl. She noticed that his right hand was frozen, and yet he still had an air of confidence to him. He then did the same to Amethyst and walked over to the frozen remains of Garnet. He bent down and crushed a piece of ice in his fist. "Go. Get everybody to the ship. I'm counting on you, Amethyst. I want to fight him by myself."

"What?!" Pearl managed to get out. "He just shattered Garnet! What hope do you have against him when a Gem couldn't stop him!"

"You said you were a Straw Hat while you were here, Pearl," Luffy gave her a serious look. "That was an order."

He then stood directly in front of Aokiji and assumed a fighting stance. "Is that a problem with you? You and me...mano a mano!"

"That's cool with me," Aokiji replied. "But I hope you know that this is going to be a fight to the death."

Amethyst could not help but admire Luffy's determination. He was going to face Aokiji by himself to give his crew the chance to escape. She could see why Steven would instantly click with him. If this is what Luffy wanted them to do, she would follow it.

As she rushed toward the group, something caught her eye. She turned toward the pile of ice where Garnet fell and could not believe her eyes. She didn't notice it at first, but coming out of the ice was the unmistakable tint of light reflecting off of two gemstones: one blue and one red. She diverted her path and started pulling away ice to grab the stones.

"What are you waiting for?!" Luffy yelled. "Get out of here!"

"Fine! I'm...I'm going!" Amethyst panted, trying not to make notice of what she was doing.

The Straw Hats themselves were in a complete state of shock and disarray. Most of them were crying their eyes out and the rest (namely Sanji and Zoro) were paralyzed with fear. Amethyst could tell that this was the first time that they had all truly been outclassed or, at least, the first time since making it to the Grand Line.

"Greg, hold these for me!" Amethyst tossed the two gems to the bawling bald man. He caught them and nearly fell back in shock.

"What?! How?!" Greg stammered as he looked down into his hands. "I thought..."

"Dude, shut up!" She turned back into the military transport helicopter and whistled. "Get on, guys! We can cry later!"

"Amethyst, how can you say that?!" Steven sniffled. "Garnet is..."

"Not now, Schtoo-ball," Greg whispered. "We'll explain later!"

"What?"

"Trust me! Come on before it gets colder here than a winter wonderland!" Greg motioned for his son to follow him.

Reluctantly, Steven got on Amethyst and took a seat inside of her. Chopper forced Zoro and Sanji to sit beside him so he could examine their frozen wounds. Everyone else found a spot to call their own with Pearl practically collapsing in her chair, tears streaming down her face. With everyone seated, Amethyst took off to the other side of the island, leaving Aokiji and Luffy alone.

"The perma...I mean, Garnet...she's really gone," Peridot shook her head, unable to comprehend what she just witnessed. "I never would have believed that it was possible for a human to do that..."

"I'm so sorry that this happened today," Robin lowered her head in shame. "This never would have happened if I wasn't here..."

"Not another word like that!" Greg gave her a weak, tired smile. "You saw how quick everyone was to defend you. We wouldn't have done that if we didn't care about you!"

"But Garnet...captain...Mr. Swordsman...Mr. Cook..." Robin looked to her fellow Straw Hats.

"We knew the risks," Zoro replied. "You don't have to feel bad. We are pirates; this is what we do."

"What about your shoulder?!" Connie asked worryingly. "That looks terrible!"

"When we get back to the ship, I'm going to have them dive into the ocean," Chopper explained as he put his paw on Zoro's shoulder. "The water should quicken the thawing process...then they will massage the frozen areas back to health!"

"That's...that's good!" Connie gave a small smile before looking back over to Steven, who was weeping for Garnet. Though she was hurting too, she pulled the boy to her and let him cry on her shoulder. "It will be okay, Steven...it has too, right? Right?"

"I don't know, Connie. This is unlike anything we have ever experienced before. I can't believe we are retreating..." Usopp ran his hands through his hair. Finally, he snapped and pointed back to the area where Luffy was fighting. "We need to go back for him!"

"It's one-on-one, Usopp!" Zoro yelled at him. "Don't you understand what that means?! If you interrupt that, it means that you have no honor!"

"I...I know," Usopp put his head down in shame. "I just can't get over it. We fought Crocodile...we fought Enel...yet one man is all it took..." He gripped his knees and started to shake. "Is this how it is going to be now on the Grand Line? Is everyone going to have the strength of this guy?! The man brought down Garnet by himself for crying out loud! I..."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that..." Greg interjected. The weary man flashed the two gemstones he was carrying and waved them

around. "Lookie what we have here!"

"Is...is that...?!" Pearl fell off of her seat. "How...?! When?!"

"Amethyst saw them in the ice rubble," Greg explained, taking a huge breath and passing the stones to Pearl. Steven's eyes lit up instantly.

"Ruby! Sapphire! They made it!" Steven started to cry in relief. "They weren't shattered! They were just poofed!"

"This is fantastic! I knew a human couldn't shatter a Gem like that!" Peridot started to do a little dance. "Huzzah!"

"What...what are you talking about?" Sanji asked, wincing as Chopper looked over his leg. "Who the hell are Ruby and Sapphire and what does this have to do with this situation?!"

"Sanji...you're joking, right?" Usopp got himself together and peered over to look at the two gems. "I thought we went over this!"

"Usopp, Sanji wasn't there...and everyone else who was there was too busy with Petrea to be a part of our conversation," Nami reminded him in a shaky, yet relieved, voice.

"Oh yeah...I guess that makes sense," Usopp nodded.

"Wait...so only you two know?" Greg pointed to them. "Wow."

"Know what?" Genevieve asked through her own tears. "What are you guys going on about?"

"What I mean is...do...do you all not know anything about Garnet?" Greg asked. "Did you not know that she is a fusion?"

The space inside of Amethyst was silent for a moment before nearly everyone shouted at once. For one brief moment, the knowledge that Garnet was a fusion was enough to force their minds away from the duel that was happening on the other side of the island...

The duel that would probably kill Straw Hat Luffy.

GWMAPT

In less than five moves, Luffy was encapsulated in ice.

Aokiji was largely surprised by the pirate's will to fight. Despite that, he did not see the match as a challenge. The youth was every bit as tenacious as his grandfather, but it was not enough to save him. He was at Aokiji's mercy in no time at all. He was about to leave to go after the remainder of the Straw Hats before stopping mid-stride.

"...well, what do you know? The punk tricked me," Aokiji found himself sitting down in front of the frozen statue of Luffy. "If I went to attack any of your friends, I would be breaking my promise...wouldn't I, Monkey D. Luffy? Was that your plan...or did you actually think you could beat me?"

He forced himself up and stared at the frozen form before him. "Is this how they will remember you: surrounded by winter, forever seen to be foolish for trusting that woman? Can't you see that she brings nothing but misfortune? Mark my words: she will break you. Be it your spirit or your body, you and your crew will suffer the consequences of calling her a friend."

He debated for a moment to shatter Luffy where he stood, but decided against it. "It would be easier to kill you here, but it wouldn't be right. We are even now, Monkey D. Luffy. You helped the world defeat Crocodile. Consider us now even."

The man began to walk away toward his transport: a simple bicycle. Before mounting it, he examined his log pose to see where he would be going next. "...Water Seven, the city of water? Well, it seems you are getting dangerously close to Marine Headquarters, Monkey D. Luffy..." Aokiji mounted his bicycle and began to rise it in the icy path he created earlier. As he rode, he began to talk to himself. "I wonder...should I have killed you after all to spare you what could very easily be on the horizon for you?"

He looked back to the shore and saw that the purple Gem was returning back to where Luffy was now frozen. He knew that they could revive him easily enough, but the damage was done. He had wounded him, probably beyond repair. "No...you're too foolish for

that. You'll see firsthand what could happen to you...and then we will see what kind of a man Monkey D. Luffy really is."

The Reforming

After what felt like an eternity, Monkey D. Luffy opened his eyes.

The action caused the pirate great pain, but it was something he had to do. His vision was blurry and he could only make out faint shapes at first, but slowly things began to become clearer to him. It appeared he was on the couch in the men's quarters with only one other person by his side. It was Steven, reading something aloud to, seemingly, the pirate himself. It appeared that he didn't know that Luffy was awake yet.

"Stealthily, force field controls are touched, lowering the block. Then...the process begun in the Carbon-Freezing of the Bepin System's Cloud City mining community is at long last reversed. And a prisoner delivered by one bounty hunter, Boba Fett, is freed by another," Steven was reading from the book. He then changed his voice into a deeper, gruffer one. *"C-can't see...can't see!"*

"St...Steven?" Luffy managed to get out weakly. "What are...how did...?"

"Luffy!" Steven cheered, placing down the book on the table and jumping on the couch. "You're finally awake!"

"I...what are you doing?" Luffy forced himself to wipe his eyes.

"What am I...oh!" Steven held up a comic book. "It's one of the *Star Wars* books I gave you! Sapphire suggested that some light reading would be good for you!"

"Sapphire? Who...wait!" Luffy ignored the mention of the mysterious person. "Where is Aokiji? How did I get here?"

"It's...it's a long story," Steven bit his lip and looked away. "You were frozen solid when we found you. Chopper managed to thaw you out...but Aokiji disappeared. You've been out for almost a full day. We docked near another part of the archipelago while Nami makes sure that the log pose is properly reset or something."

"He did? I was?" Luffy frowned. "I don't believe it! What about Robin or...oh my gosh! Garnet!"

"Garnet?" Steven repeated before hitting himself. "Oh! Garnet! Don't worry about Garnet!"

"B-But she's dead!" Luffy could barely get it out. "We saw her!"

"Well..." Steven started before getting cut off by the hatch leading to the deck opening. It opened slowly to reveal a short, blue-skinned woman with long, wavy pale blue hair covering her face. She wore a blue and white floor-length gown. Most alarmingly, it appeared that she was floating down until she reached the lower level of the men's quarters. "Sapphire!"

"Hello, Steven," the short woman replied. "Pirate Captain Luffy, it is good to see you awake."

Luffy blinked a few times and cocked his head in confusion. "Uh...who are you supposed to be?"

"My name is Sapphire and..." Sapphire began before Luffy quickly jumped off of the couch and pointed at her.

"Who gave you permission to be on my ship?!" Luffy asked.

"You did...in a manner of speaking," Sapphire answered, keeping her voice calm and mellow. "Look at my face. Does the shape of it remind you of anyone you know?"

Luffy narrowed his eyes and examined the lower half of the blue woman's face. The structure of her jaw and pronounced lips looked familiar, but the pirate couldn't quite put his finger on where he saw her before. "I don't..." Luffy looked over to Steven, who was holding back laughter. "What? Why are you laughing?"

"Give it a moment, Pirate Captain Luffy. You'll put the pieces together in less than a minute," Sapphire told him.

Just as Luffy was about to reply, he picked up on how Sapphire addressed him. The only being who addressed Luffy as "Pirate Captain Luffy" was... "Garnet?! Is that you?!"

Unable to contain his laughter any longer, Steven began to bust his gut. "Luffy, Garnet is a fusion! She is what happens when Sapphire and another Gem, Ruby, fuse!"

"WHAT?! NO WAY! THAT IS SO AWESOME!" Luffy began to examine Sapphire like she were a porcelain doll. "I HAD NO IDEA THAT GARNET WAS A FUSION!"

"We don't really advertise it," Sapphire explained, ignoring Luffy's prodding. "I hope you are not mad about the deception."

"Deception? Who cares! That means my crew number went up by one person...I mean Gem!" Luffy grinned excitedly, forgetting the pain that his body was in. "Where is the other one? What was her name? Rudy?"

"Ruby. Her name is Ruby," Sapphire corrected him. "She still hasn't reformed yet, but she will before the day's end."

"Are you sure about that?" Luffy asked.

"Reasonably."

GWMAPT

After changing into his usual clothing, Luffy led Steven and Sapphire outside of the men's quarters and back to the deck. Unsurprisingly, the Straw Hats were all there. Given the large number of people on the ship since Steven's initial arrival on the Grand Line, it had proven impossible to fit everyone in the meeting room at one time. As such, practically everything was done outside on the deck.

"And there is nothing more you can tell us about that man?" Pearl was probing Robin, circling around her like a hawk.

"Nothing more than what I have already told you, Miss Pearl...and I do not appreciate your accusatory tone," Robin's eyes narrowed.

"I don't appreciate Garnet getting poofed by a human! This is a serious issue that requires answers!" Pearl argued.

"She's been more than cooperative!" Peridot defended her friend.

"There was more than enough useful information to determine that human's threat level!"

"There just has to be more! I don't care that he has a Devil Fruit; the fact that a human was capable of such feats is beyond even me!"

"Pearl...you are doing it again," Greg pointed out with a slight cough.

"I'm doing what, Greg?" Pearl snapped at him.

"You...you are kind of putting us down...humans, I mean," Greg backed away. "You've kind of been doing that a lot lately. It's freaking me out a bit."

"I most certainly am not!" Pearl defended herself. "I am merely stating my incredulity at the idea of a lone human defeating three Crystal Gems so easily!"

"Is it really that difficult to believe?" Zoro asked, cutting in. "Mr. 1 gave you trouble and he was just an assassin. That fake version of Mihawk trounced you and that wasn't even the real deal. Aokiji is an admiral in the Marines. They tend to be a bit more powerful in that regard. That just gives us another level to aspire to reach."

"Aspire to reach? I have been fighting for over five thousand years with more experience than any person on this planet in the art of combat!"

"That didn't stop Garnet from getting poofed," Zoro shot back, clearly starting to get a bit tense. "Nor did all my experience stop me from getting frozen. Our training did not matter in the slightest. They are in a different league than us...both of us. We just need to use it as a means to better ourselves and not let it consume our self-confidence."

"I...that is to say..." Pearl looked flustered as her cheeks turned bright blue. "We were worn down from fighting Amethyst and..."

"It wouldn't have made a difference, Pearl," Sapphire called to them, signaling their presence to the room. "We would have lost no matter what. That man was too strong for the three of us to handle."

"Luffy!" the Straw Hats cried at once, while Pearl looked at Sapphire instead. The first thing Luffy noticed was how hurt she was in that moment. It wasn't physical pain, but rather it was her pride.

"I can't believe you are back on your feet already!" Connie said in awe despite being clearly overjoyed at his presence. "It shouldn't be possible!"

"You shouldn't be moving already!" Chopper scolded, running over to him. "Your muscles are in really bad shape!"

"It's okay, you two. I'm pretty quick about bouncing back!" Luffy grinned, causing Chopper, Connie, Usopp, Damian, and Steven to laugh.

"Rubber jokes!" Steven continued to laugh.

"Don't do anything too strenuous!" Chopper managed to get out between laughs. "Doctor's orders!"

"Will do! So...what's going on guys? I...what are you painting?" Luffy asked the crew as a whole and Genevieve, trying to diffuse the tension. Though typically oblivious to these kinds of things, Luffy refused to let anyone beat themselves up over this situation. Yes, it was more of a wake-up call than they were expecting, but everybody made it out alive. That is what truly mattered to Luffy.

That, and making sure Steven was okay. The youth seemed a bit shaken up at the potential confrontation unfolding around him and Luffy would have none of that. The last thing Steven or anybody needed was more confrontation.

"You frozen solid," Genevieve said nonchalantly. "Terrifying in the moment, yet beautiful on a canvas."

"Cool!" Luffy laughed, looking at the picture of himself. As he did so, his smile faltered slightly, realizing just what had been immortalized forever by his painter.

"Besides that, Pearl's freaking out over that ice guy that beat us down," Amethyst shrugged from the corner. She was laying down on the wall, tossing a crumpled up piece of paper up and down in the

air. "You know, the usual stuff."

"Why are you taking this so lightly?!" Pearl yelled.

"Because it all worked out in the end, P. Our memories are back, rubber boy here is back on his feet, Ruby and Sapphire aren't shattered, and that ice guy didn't follow us. I'd call that a win in my book," Amethyst grabbed the paper and tossed it at Pearl, who swatted it away. "Lighten up!"

"I will NOT lighten up! This changes everything! If we can't protect Steven or Connie here, then we should leave now before things escalate out of control! What if we encounter one of the other two admirals next time?! Who will bring Connie back to her mother?!"

"Hey!" Greg interjected. "Why wasn't I on that list?!"

"I...I'm sorry, Greg. I...ugh!" Pearl threw up her hands and stormed toward the women's quarters. "This is just too much!"

"Pearl!" Steven started after her, but Sapphire stopped him.

"Give her some time, Steven. She will come around after she calms down," Sapphire explained to him. "There are times that peace comes around due to self-reflection."

"But..." Steven pleaded.

"Trust me."

The boy sighed and kicked the ground. "Fine...but I don't like it!"

"Duly noted," Sapphire gave the tiniest of smiles.

"Well, now that things are suitably awkward, what do we do now?" Usopp asked. "As thrilled as I am that Luffy is awake, I'm kind of with Pearl on this. Not the whole tirade about protecting Steven, but about Aokiji. All I keep thinking about is what else we could face out here on the Grand Line. We aren't going to get this lucky every time we get into a fight. Sooner or later, we are going to get put in a situation we can't overcome..."

"Of course we will, you idiot," Sanji snorted. "What did you expect when you set sail? Did you honestly not expect this? Crocodile and Enel could have been as powerful as that shitty admiral, but we had the advantage of using our natural abilities to combat theirs. You're right about that. We aren't going to get lucky like that again. The question is what are you going to do about it?"

"Going...going to do?" Usopp asked. "What CAN I do?! I'm not on the same level as you guys!"

"Then get on our level," Zoro added, grabbing his swords and walking away. "Stop complaining and do something about it. You want to be a brave warrior of the sea? Actually get off your ass and do it."

"Zoro!" Nami scolded him. "What the hell?!"

"I hate to admit it, but moss-head is right, Nami-san. We all have a lot of training to do if we want to keep up with the natural escalation of the world," Sanji sighed. "If anybody needs me, I'm going to make some lunch and then I'm going to do some training of my own."

"Mind if I join you?" Damian asked. "I haven't sparred with anyone since Alabasta. There hasn't really been a need to do that in Beach City."

"Why not? Just don't blow up the ship while I kick your ass. She's taken enough damage as it is," Sanji said as he entered the kitchen.

"...I should take that as an insult, but I'm simultaneously still shaken from watching Garnet get defeated so easily and excited to actually be training again," Damian chuckled to himself. "God, I'm a mess."

"I think we all are, bro," Amethyst nodded. She grabbed the discarded paper and threw it up in the air once more and watched as it drifted off into the sea. "Rats...hey, painter girl! Can I have another one of your paper things?"

"...is it just going to get thrown overboard again?" Genevieve asked, keeping to herself while she painted the image of Luffy frozen solid. She looked down at her sketch book and noticed the several pages

that were already torn off.

"Nah."

"It will," Sapphire dryly commented.

"Then no."

"Argh!"

GWMAPT

As Zoro meditated to himself in a secluded part of the Going Merry, he heard the sound of tiny footsteps approaching him. He opened his eyes and was greeted to the sight of Connie Maheswaran holding the sword once wielded by Steven's mother. She looked concerned, yet determined. "Well, if it isn't the tiger herself. Why aren't you relaxing with Steven or something?"

"He looked like he needed a moment to himself. Besides, it's like you said. We should be training our minds and bodies...even if we don't stay here for much longer. Pearl is my usual teacher, but Sapphire doesn't think that it is a good idea to talk to her while she is in this state. I kind of wanted to know..." Connie began to ask before getting stopped by Zoro.

"Take a seat," Zoro commanded. "You can't train while you are that distracted. Using a distraction is a good motivation, but it blinds you after some time."

"Yes, sir," Connie nodded. She sat down and began to emulate the swordsman. Taking deep breaths, Zoro was impressed with how dedicated she was. Steven, though eager when he trained him, tended to get distracted rather easily. He eventually worked around that by limiting his regiment to short but impactful intervals. Still, he did not think Connie was like that.

Regardless, this was a perfect opportunity for him to ask her a very serious question. He waited about fifteen minutes to ask it; partially to give her a chance to focus and partially to formulate the right words. "Connie, I have to ask you a rather personal question."

"Sure, sir! What is it?"

"First, don't call me 'sir.' Just call me Zoro."

"Yes, sir! I...I mean..." Connie started.

"I get it. I wanted to ask you about something you said before...when we all lost our memories."

"Oh! Sure! Anything!"

"When I was looking at that painting of us fighting, how did you know about her?" Zoro finally got it out.

"Who? Tashigi? I...oh," Connie's face fell almost instantly as she realized who he was talking about. "Her."

"Exactly. I never told you about her nor have I even shared that with anyone on this ship. Even when you were asking everybody about our pasts while we stayed in Vivi's palace, I was the only one who didn't give you anything," Zoro locked eyes with her. "How did you know?"

"This...this is going to sound bad, and I'm really sorry about it, but from Amethyst!" Connie's cheeks started to blush with embarrassment.

"...what?"

"Well, Steven and I were talking to each other on our phones...um...those are our version of the Den Den Mushis," Connie explained.

"I recall."

"Anyway, as Steven was explaining to me what was going on in the barn, Amethyst jumped in and had Steven put me on speakerphone so she could talk to me too. She told us how she was spying on you and Tashigi talking before you left," Connie looked away in shame. "All she managed to get out was that Tashigi looked like a...a deceased friend of yours before Steven started to scold her for blurting out personal information without asking."

"As he should have," Zoro groaned. "That was a private conversation and it should have remained private. I don't blame you, kid. Don't beat yourself up. Honestly, if you didn't tell me that in that moment, I probably would have left or started a fight."

"It still doesn't change it," Connie pointed out. "But you know...if you need someone to talk to about...about anything really, I'll be there for you."

"I don't doubt it," Zoro forced a smile. "Still, I have to ask...I don't recall our purple friend being around for that talk."

"I think she changed into a bird or something...but don't quote me on that."

"I won't. However, I'm going to be having my own personal talk with her when the opportunity presents itself..." Zoro shook his head. "Now that we have that out of the way, let's start with some basic warm ups. I always find it best to..."

Zoro was cut short by the sound of yelling coming from the next room. What began was an excited cry from, presumably, Pearl changed into a thud as the dainty Gem was yelled at by a raspy, feminine voice. The two listened as tiny feet began to shuffle near where they were when finally they were confronted by a small, scarlet girl. She was around the same height as Connie and had a burgundy afro covered with a maroon headband. Zoro looked incredulously at the random appearance of this person. "What...the hell...is that?"

"Ugh! She's not here! Connie! Do you know where Sapphire is?" she asked, ignoring Zoro.

Connie, looking almost as confused as Zoro was, gained a look of recognition rather quickly. "Oh, Ruby! I...I think she is on the deck! Do you want us to take you there?"

"Yes! Hurry!" Ruby motioned for them to lead the way. "She doesn't know I'm back yet!"

Zoro started to rub his head as he collected his swords. "I guess

that's all the training for today. So...half of Garnet?"

"Half of Garnet," Connie confirmed.

"Gem magic is complicated."

GWMAPT

Steven didn't entirely know how to feel in the present moment.

On one hand, he was elated to see Luffy back to full strength. He was worried desperately about him when his body was recovered, and had offered his help to Chopper in any way that he could when he began the thawing process. Amazingly, it did not take long for him to bounce back, but Luffy is a special individual. Pain doesn't seem to register to him.

On the other hand, Steven did feel pain. Though he knew that the events of the previous day were not truly Amethyst's fault, the truth was that Steven had his own suspicions about his family for the past year. How did the Gems feel about him in the sense that he was alive only because Rose Quartz gave up her life? Amethyst truly blamed him for it and had acted particularly cruel to him...had the Gems acted that way when he was born? Did they resent him at some point? Do they still resent him for it?

These were questions that nagged Steven to no end and would probably do so for some time. He desperately wanted to talk to them, but was truthfully afraid of what he would hear. Amethyst was always fairly straightforward with him, but what about Garnet? Surely she saw that Rose would want him to be born. Did she try to talk her out of it?

What about Pearl: the only being who probably missed his mom as much, if not more, than his father? She was so hurt the day that she found out that Steven visited Rose's armory without her. How hurt was she really?

Of course, despite all those misgivings, there was no doubt in his mind that the three of them truly loved him. Rose might have been the one to give birth to him, but the Gems were his true mothers. He

could always rely on them to be by his side. They were with him no matter where he went and they even traversed the Multiverse to find him when they weren't. That love is why it bothered Steven to even have those thoughts. That love is what prevented him to find the strength to ask them about it.

After all, how exactly does one go about asking your mothers if they resent him for existing?

"You seem very lost in thought," the voice of Genevieve brought him back to reality. "What is on your mind, Steven Universe?"

"Oh! Genevieve...I...um...it's nothing," Steven brushed his feelings aside. "I'm just thinking about the past few days."

"I hear you. They've sucked," Genevieve poked him with her brush. "But they would have sucked more if you guys weren't here to liven it up."

"Really? Has it been that dull without us?" Steven asked, a smile forming on his face.

"Eh, we went up in the sky and found some islands in the clouds, fought a god and his priests, and got some gold out of it. I'd call that pretty dull," Genevieve shrugged. "Say, can you grab me my rice cracker? I left it over by my canvas?"

Steven stared at the half-eaten cracker and couldn't help but chuckle to himself as he walked over to get it. Genevieve was nowhere near as lazy as she was when he first met her, but she was still the same person deep down inside. It was funny just how different she, Petrea, and Damian were from when he first met them. They seemed much more open than before. They didn't have to hide how goofy they could be if they wanted to. They were just free to live life as they wanted.

Then he thought how his mother would have found them fascinating, and he began to think about the Gems again. This time, he mentally stopped himself before he would let it consume him.

"Here you go," Steven said in a cheery voice.

"Thanks," she said as she took a bite. "So...are you going to tell me what is really bothering you?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Steven, I haven't heard you sing a song since your party. Plus, I know your forced smile compared to your genuine one."

"How?"

"Painter. Consistency," Genevieve reminded him.

"Ah," Steven sat next to her and stared out at the nearby island. "I just...the whole thing with Amethyst yesterday...it really hurt, you know?"

"I can imagine," Genevieve finished her snack in one final bite. "I'm honestly surprised how well you are handling it."

The comment took Steven completely off-guard. "Really? Why?"

"If that were me and my parents, I'd probably seclude myself and paint until I fell asleep."

"But you love painting!"

"And you love singing. Some people sing when they are happy. Some sing when they are sad. It is the same with art. I can tell you how I felt as I painted each and every painting on this ship purely by the line work and framing," Genevieve explained. "You'd be surprised how easily that comes for me."

"It doesn't surprise me at all," Steven admitted. "You're the best painter on the Grand Line! They just don't know it yet!"

"And there's the Steven we all know and love," Genevieve gave a small smile. "Look, all I'm gonna say is that it is okay to feel bad about things...but if you taught me anything, it is that things get better. Give it time and you'll be able to truly move past this."

"Wow," Steven gave her a tight bear hug. "That was so moving! Thank you, Genevieve! I really needed that!"

"I figured as much," she tried to squirm out of his grip. "But watch yourself! You are choking me!"

"Oh! Oh, sorry!" Steven let her go, causing her to catch her breath. "I sometimes forget my own strength!"

"I...I should have expected that," Genevieve groaned. "Connie is going to have to be on-guard with that."

"With what?" Steven asked, not sure what she was talking about.

"...you might be my age, but you've still got some ways to go, Steven Universe," Genevieve couldn't stop herself from chuckling again.

Before Steven could make further inquiries about the comment, Zoro and Connie made their presence emerged back onto the deck. However, they were not alone. Following them was a most familiar face to Steven, which caused him to jump up and run over to them. "Ruby!"

He was not alone in his exclamation. Sapphire, who had been talking to Robin and Peridot, turned sharply around to meet her. For her part, Ruby was just as elated to see Sapphire as well. "Ruby! I didn't expect you to reform so fast!"

"I didn't reform fast enough! Are you okay? That admiral didn't hurt you or anything?!" Ruby looked her over, taking the chance to twirl the Gem a bit.

"Of course not. Now that you are here, everything in my world is better," Sapphire smiled.

"Mine too," Ruby blushed, and looked away from her. Her eyes locked eyes with the oncoming Steven and she gladly opened her arms to accept the inevitable hug. "Aww, Steven! Come here, buddy!" As he did hug her, she made sure to give a wave to Amethyst, who looked equally pleased to see her. It was clear she didn't care about the rest of the Straw Hats in that moment. She only had eyes for her beloved Sapphire and for the boy she cared for like a son.

"I'm so happy that you are back!" Steven held her excitedly. "Are you guys going to fuse back into Garnet?!"

"Only if my Sapphy is ready for it," Ruby winked at Sapphire, causing her to be the one that blushed this time.

"Oh, Ruby!"

"Waaaaaaaait!" Peridot yelled as she herself ran over to them. "I actually have both of you here together! In one place! Unfused! I didn't think I would ever see this happen in person! I have so many questions!"

"WAIT! YOU'RE RUDY!" Luffy yelled out in excitement. "GUYS, DID YOU KNOW THAT GARNET IS A FUSION?!"

"...yes, Luffy. We knew that," Nami hanged her head in shame. "And it's Ruby, not Rudy. Get the names of your crew right!"

"Aww," Luffy said dejectedly.

"Don't worry about it, Pirate Captain Luffy," Ruby gave him a thumbs up. "It's all good with me."

"Woo-hoo!" Luffy cheered.

"So you two form Garnet?" Robin asked, very curious. "How can you maintain the form for so long? I was under the impression that fusion is difficult to maintain for long amounts of time."

"It is for most...but not for us," Ruby grinned as she grabbed Sapphire and went in to kiss her. The second the two touched each other, their gemstones started to shine bright as their forms merged into one.

"Or, more precisely, not for me," the newly reborn Garnet smirked as she adjusted her shades.

The Straw Hats all looked speechless as they processed what they just witnessed. Finally, it was Peridot who broke the ice. "Gah! You didn't let me ask any of my questions!"

The Dream Island

"...so Sapphire is the one who can see into the future...but what can Ruby do?" Nami asked.

Lunch had proven to be a time of intense questioning for Garnet. The Straw Hats were deeply curious about how exactly she worked. It was one thing to see Sardonyx or Lufven in action, since they all knew the individual components of those fusions, but this was something completely different. Their time with Sapphire was interesting but short-lived. Their time with Ruby was even shorter. Thankfully, Garnet welcomed the questions. By this point, Pearl sulked back from the women's quarters and joined them, choosing to sit by herself. Steven and Connie tried to go near her, but Amethyst and Greg motioned for her to be left alone. Still, Pearl's mood did not interrupt the mood of the lunch at all.

The Gem fusion turned her hand into a gauntlet and held it up.
"This. Next question."

"If Ruby ate something and then fused into you, does Sapphire feel if you have to go to the bathroom?" Luffy raised his hand.

"Yes," Garnet nodded without changing her stoic expression.

"Cool!"

"I've been thinking about it, but is this the reason why you wanted two candles that were different colors?" Petrea asked after she took a bite of her sandwich. "One for Ruby and one for Sapphire?"

"Ruby thought it would be a good touch," Garnet smiled. "She's emotional like that."

"I knew there had to have been a reason behind that!" Petrea gave a fist pump. "God, you have no idea how much that has been bothering me!"

"I've got one," Sanji asked as he emptied the ash off of his cigarette. "You just said that Ruby had her own idea for the birthday cake,

right? How does this whole thing work? You two have been fused for a long time, right? How can the blue one and the red one...I don't know...talk?"

"There are times when Ruby and Sapphire indeed talk to each other inside of my head. It is the same thing as when you have conflicting thoughts of your own...though most of their conversations could be considered anything but conflicting," Garnet explained. "Fusion is only complicated because you haven't experienced it. If a fusion is not perfectly in sync, it is easy for the Gems to lose themselves in it. But if you are lucky enough to be truly in sync, you can never truly lose yourself because you are already joined in ways people and Gems spend their whole lives trying to achieve."

"...fair enough," Sanji took another drag of his cigarette. "Say, you don't happen to see any of that in my future, do you?"

"Hmm..." Garnet went quiet for a moment. "I see one potential future of you finding happiness with someone who you have grown close to...and two futures where you get hit into the wall by the navigator."

"I like those odds!" Sanji grinned. "NAMI-SAN! DON'T YOU WANT TO LOVE ME?"

He went in for a kiss only for Nami to punch him into the wall, eliciting laughs from most of the Straw Hats. Garnet smirked and gave a single chuckle. "I warned him."

"DON'T ENCOURAGE HIM!" Nami yelled at Garnet.

"I couldn't help myself," Garnet admitted.

"Oh! Oh! I have another question!" Luffy jumped up and down.

"Luffy, why the heck do you have ANY questions? You are the only one of us to actually experience fusion! If anyone should know what that entails, it'd be you!" Usopp pointed.

The captain opened his mouth to protest before closing it and thinking for a moment. "Oh yeah! I guess you are right!"

"Never change, Luffy," Steven laughed, clearly in better spirits. The

other Straw Hats merely looked at Luffy with incredulity at how his mind worked.

"The things one could learn probing your thoughts..." Sanji quipped. "I don't know if it'd be terrifying or enlightening."

"Probably both," Damian muttered.

"Are all of you done with your questioning?!" Peridot blurted out. She held up multiple sheets of paper and waved them around. "I have a meticulous list of questions for you! This may take quite a bit of time but..."

"...is that my sketch paper?" Genevieve sighed and lowered her head.

"You get one," Garnet folded her arms. "One question."

"Outrageous!" Peridot looked offended. "How can I pick just one?!"

"Pick the one that means the most to you," Garnet encouraged her. "I have faith in you."

"I...that is to say..." Peridot ran her hands through her hair as she had a small internal breakdown. Finally, she composed herself and gave a slight cough. "Why?"

"Uh...what?" Luffy asked. "What does that mean?"

"What I mean is...why do you chose to remain fused?! Why continue with this?! This fusion serves no object purpose at all! Why?!" Peridot demanded. "Why do you exist?!"

Garnet was silent for a moment as she processed the question. As she did so, Peridot could not help but feel the judging eyes of the others staring at her. She turned around weakly and got a glimpse of it for herself. Greg looked nervous, Connie looked concerned, most of the Straw Hats looked interested in the response yet annoyed in her presentation, Amethyst raised an eyebrow (despite not having any), Pearl did not even acknowledge her, but Steven and Robin?

They both merely gave her a reassuring smile and a nod

respectively. The sheer thought that, despite being forced to come to this dimension, she had two beings who seemingly had her back made her feel...wanted and respected. It was a rare feeling for the Gem and it was one she deeply relished. Homeworld rarely viewed her as anything other than a Peridot. Steven and Robin viewed her as an individual.

That would take some getting used to.

"Peridot, that is a question that I will gladly answer for you in the future. It is a rather detailed and loaded question that I am not sure you are ready to fully comprehend, but I will tell you this: I choose to live my life this way because that is what it is: my choice. If I want to live my life this way, nobody can tell me differently. Everyone on this ship has a dream and a goal, even you," Garnet told her. "You just don't know it yet."

"My...my goal? My dream? How can I have a dream?! My dream is to survive the Cluster! My dream is to be useful to Yellow Diamond and..." Peridot stammered before Garnet put her finger to her lips.

"That isn't a goal. That is self-preservation and self-indoctrination," Garnet shook her head. "I want you think long and hard about who or what you are fighting for. You don't have to tell me now, but I'd like to hear it one day soon. I have faith in you, Peridot. Have some faith in yourself."

"But...but..." Peridot just stood there, clearly unable to comprehend what was just told to her.

"It's easy to have a dream!" Luffy smiled. "I will fight to be the Pirate King!"

"I will fight to cure all diseases!" Chopper stood up and joined him.

"I will fight to be a brave warrior of the sea!" Usopp exclaimed.

"I will fight to be the greatest swordsman that has ever lived!" Zoro raised one of his swords in the air.

"I will fight to find the sea where all of the seas converge: the All-Blue!" Sanji adjusted his tie.

"I will fight to be the greater painter in the world," Genevieve weakly raised her paintbrush.

"I will fight to chart a map of the world!" Nami added. "And to get money!"

"I will fight to learn the truth behind the Void Century," Robin smiled.

"I...well, I kind of accomplished my dreams...but still!" Damian stood up and folded his arms. "I fought to be a fireman!"

"And I fought to make chocolate for everyone to enjoy!" Petrea giggled.

Peridot just stood there with her mouth wide-open. She clearly did not know how to respond. "I...do ALL of you have these dreams?" She looked over to the Gems, Greg, Connie, and Steven.

"Of course we have dreams!" Connie exclaimed. "I will fight to protect the planet by Steven's side!"

"I...huh, I don't really know..." Greg admitted. "I guess I'll fight to be the best father I can be!"

"What about you?" Peridot asked the Gems.

"I will fight for the place where I'm free to live together and exist as me!" Garnet stood up and nudged Pearl, who sighed and smiled.

She produced one of her spears and twirled it around, finally posing with it. "I will fight in the name of Rose Quartz and everything that she believed in!"

"I will fight for the world I was made in! The Earth is everything I've ever known!" Amethyst grinned as she patted Pearl on the back, clearly happy that something caused her to snap out of it.

"I will fight to be everything that everybody wants me to be when I'm grown!" Steven finished it off, grinning and looking happily at his friends.

However, his friends merely stared at him in confusion. They began

to read back Steven's statement back in their heads and it was clear that what they heard disturbed them a bit. "Steven...what does that mean?" Nami asked.

"It means just that," Steven frowned. "What's wrong with my dream?"

"It's just...um...that isn't really YOUR dream," Petrea added. "That just means that you are trying to live your life to somebody else's standards."

"That's a very Peridot-like thing to say," Usopp pointed out.

"Hey!"

"It's true!"

"But..." Steven just stood there. "But I want to be like my mom. Everybody looked up to her...and everybody respected her. She was just so nice and friendly...she even gave up her life so I could exist! Why is it wrong to want to be selfless?"

"There isn't anything wrong with that," Luffy stood up for him. "If you want to be like your mom, then do it! But don't do it for anyone but yourself. If anyone tells you otherwise, they will have to deal with us!"

As Steven contemplated about what Luffy said, Garnet took the opportunity to address Peridot. "As you can see, individuality is all the rage these days. You should try it."

"...maybe I should..." Peridot looked down at her hands and clenched them in a fist. In a low whisper, she asked herself one question: "What do I want to fight for?"

GWMAPT

Pearl took a moment to appreciate the beauty that was Nami's tangerine trees. She had never actually taken the time to examine them, but were impressed by them. The fact that she would take time to care for them the entire time they were out at sea reminded her that, despite her instinctive reaction to think of pirates as lowly,

Steven really had found a great group of people to call friends. They proved themselves worthy allies in battle and have shown that they truly cared for her charge.

It still did not change how she felt in the present moment.

Though she was not as sullen as before, she still could not believe what occurred on that island. In her world, humanity could not hold a candle to the inherent power of Gems. The only way a Gem could be defeated by a human was, amazingly, through love and compassion. That is what caused Lapis Lazuli to trap Jasper in an unstable fusion and that is what caused Rose Quartz to give up her physical form. True, it was not a defeat in the traditional sense, but Pearl could not discount it on a technical level.

In her mind, losing Rose was a defeat on the highest level.

But that admiral was different. His strength was unheard of. Pearl had no doubt he could even give one of the Diamonds a run for their money. Was that just a perk of this world? Were humans naturally stronger here? Was it a perk of the Devil Fruits? Pearl did not know but part of her wished to find out. The man, though dangerous, appealed to Pearl's desire to prove herself in battle. If she could beat him, she could show everyone just how proficient she truly was...

"Whatcha doin' up here?" a voice snapped her out of it. Pearl turned around quickly and saw the smiling form of Monkey D. Luffy right in her face.

"Gah! Don't sneak up on me like that!" Pearl's cheeks turned blue. "I could have seriously injured you!"

"Why would you do that?" Luffy asked.

"I wouldn't want to kill you! I...never mind. I don't think you'd understand," Pearl shook her head. "And what can I do for you today, captain?"

"Well...there is one thing you can do for me," Luffy told her.

"What would that be?"

"It is only something reaaaaaaally unimportant..." Luffy continued.

"Luffy, just tell me already! What do you want from me?!"

"I want to know why you are sad," Luffy asked, his smile shifting from a goofy grin to something more...comforting. "I'm worried about you!"

"'Worried?' You don't need to be worried for me!" Pearl quickly said, touched by the thought. "I...I am just a bit shaken up after...I'm surprised you bounced back so fast!"

"We got away and everyone is okay," Luffy nodded. "That's what important."

"But you were close to death! Surely that means something to you!"

"That just means I need to get stronger if I'm going to be the Pirate King!" Luffy folded his arms. "Lunch was a good start, but I've got to find more food before I can start training."

"I believe I might have underestimated you," Pearl admitted. "You seem to be far more focused and determined than I ever gave you credit for."

"Thanks...I guess," Luffy shrugged. "Do you like being here?"

"What?"

"I mean, do you like being a part of the crew? You never really seem happy...am I not doing a good job at being your captain?" Luffy seemed really concerned.

"It...it is not that I am unhappy..." Pearl searched for the correct words, clearly surprised at Luffy's forward approach. "I have a lot on my mind. Between the Cluster and Malachite, there have been a lot to deal with. If we can't stop it, our Earth will be destroyed and all of Rose's sacrifices with it. I refuse to allow that to happen!"

"But what about right now?" Luffy questioned.

"Now? Now we have engaged a law enforcement official and lost!"

Now we are still here when we should be focusing on the matters that affect my Earth! Now..." Pearl stopped as she locked eyes with Luffy. Without saying a word, she could see the pleading look in his eyes. It was so similar to Steven's that it took her back. "I'm sorry. I...I am sure I would be having a better time if I had more reassurances about our situation. Steven and Connie seem happy...I suppose that is what I should be focusing on."

"Is there anything I can do to help stop that Cluster-thing?" Luffy asked sincerely. "I refuse to let one of my crew down."

"I...I don't think so," Pearl sighed. She shut her eyes before opening them fast. "Although...Garnet did bring up that your dimension might have materials that would speed up the completion of our drill..."

"That's it!" Luffy announced. "We are going to get you what you need on the next island we go to!"

"You don't have to..."

"I insist! We have all of that gold we got from the sky island," Luffy explained. "I'd be happy to give you what you need to help!"

"I...I'm touched," Pearl smiled. "Thank you, Monkey D. Luffy. You are a noble captain."

"Aw, shucks!"

"Still...have you considered other uses for your newfound wealth?" the Gem inquired.

"Like a bigger refrigerator so Sanji can make more food for me?" Luffy nodded. "I've given that a lot of thought!"

"Well, no...that wasn't what I had in mind," Pearl couldn't help but chuckle. "I've been examining your ship and I couldn't help but notice the condition it is in..."

"It did just fall from the sky," Luffy pointed out. "What's wrong otherwise?"

"I believe that it might be prudent for you to get it repaired beyond

what the liar has been doing. I know a tiny bit about the art of ship design and I can see that your ship is in major need of repairs," Peal explained to him. "I'd also suggest searching for an experienced shipwright to keep this vessel seafaring."

"I think Nami mentioned that a few times..." Luffy thought about it. "Okay! We will use our money to fix Merry and to get you Clusterbuster parts!"

"Cluster...buster...?"

"Isn't that what your drill-thing is?"

"I...I have no response to that."

GWMAPT

That night, Steven was in a much better place than when he woke up. Garnet was back, Pearl snapped out of her bad mood and apologized to Robin for her behavior, Luffy was awake and made an announcement about fixing Merry and trying to help with the drill (which Steven now called the "Clusterbuster" after Luffy called it that, much to Pearl's embarrassment), and everyone was in a much more positive mood after the fight with Aokiji and the incident with the memories. The only other negative thing that happened was Zoro apparently having a minor fight with Amethyst over something. Steven tried to find out what had happened, but Connie told him not to worry about it.

Of course, Steven always worried for everyone. It was a blessing and a curse.

Still, the one thing he couldn't stop thinking about was his declaration of his dream. It concerned him that his friends found it a bit weird that he wanted to live up to his mom's standards. She was as close to perfect as possible. She cared for everyone and anything. Life was precious to her. That was admirable and it was something that Steven held onto.

He decided that it was less about what his dream was and more about how he worded it. That line of thought got him to start thinking

about the others and their dreams. He really hoped they all achieved them. They all deserved it. He wanted to be there for them in any way he could. Then he began to think about all of them as people. Some of them he knew quite well. He knew all about Damian, Chopper, Nami, and Genevieve by asking them. However, there was still so much he did not know about the rest of the crew. Despite fusing with Luffy, he knew very little of his life before setting out to sea. He knew that a red-haired pirate named Shanks gave him his straw hat, that he had a brother named Ace, and that his grandfather is a vice admiral in the Marines. Along those same lines, Robin was also a mystery. Despite vague descriptions of her home of Ohara, Steven knew so little about who Robin was and what made her tick.

Of course, there were a lot of questions that Steven debated about asking everyone. In the end, he decided to leave them be. The Straw Hats and Gems would tell him what he needed to know when it was important.

As Steven curled up in his caterpillar sleeping bag, he allowed his mind to wander. Slowly, the world was behind him and Steven found himself in the world of his dreams. All the usuals were there: Dog Copter, Cookie Cat, Lion, a mysterious island in the distance...

"Wait...that's new!" Dream-Steven told himself. "Should I go over there?"

"You must do what you feel is right, of course," Dog Copter explained to him. "It could be your first step into a larger world."

"Boy, you're right! Thanks, Dog Copter! **Go-Go-Steven-Rocket-Pack!**" Steven snapped his fingers and watched as a rocket pack materialized on his back. He ignited it and began to fly over to the mysterious place. As he drew closer to it, he began to notice something off about it. The mountains appeared to be made of steak and the trees looked like they had chicken legs dangling from them. "Uh...what part of my subconscious is this?"

Steven finally landed onto the surface of the island and could not help to be drawn to the smells of what appeared to be cooked meat all around him. How he smelled anything in his dream, Steven did not know. However, he soon forgot all about logical questions when

he laid eyes upon a group of boys playing and feasting like kings. It took Steven only a moment, but he was shocked as he realized who he was seeing. One of the boys appeared to be a young..."Oh my gosh! It's a little Luffy!"

He already had the scar right below his eye and was wearing his straw hat. However, he was closer in size and potentially age as Steven was. Before he planned to make himself known, he looked surprised to recognize one of the other boys. "Baby Ace too?! This is making my dreams come true...which makes sense, considering I am in a dream!"

Steven stared curiously at the final boy, trying to match his youthful complexion to the face of somebody he met on his travels. He wore a black top hat with blue goggles on it that hid what appeared to be curly, blond hair. His smile revealed a gap in his teeth not unlike his friend Peedee. "Who is this kid? Luffy never mentioned him...but if he is a friend of Luffy's then he'll be a friend of mine!"

The half-Gem decided to listen in on their conversation to get a clearer picture of what was going on. "Boy, Luffy! I can't believe you saved me from this beef bear before," Ace was saying as he took a huge bite of what Steven assumed was the meat animal in question. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you have gotten stronger!"

"Still not as strong as you, Ace!" Luffy laughed. "Sabo, can you pass me that chicken-caterpillar? I'm starving!"

The unknown boy merely sighed. "You'd think that a kingdom of meat would be enough to quell your appetite. Nope; still the same old loveable Luffy!"

"I wouldn't have it any other way! I...huh?" Luffy continued to laugh until he finally noticed Steven trying to keep out of the way. "STEVEN?! HOW'D YOU GET HERE?!"

Steven couldn't be sure if Luffy was excited, surprised, angry, or some combination of them all. Ever the optimist, Steven waved and rode his jetpack over to them. "I don't know! I was chilling with Dog Copter and then I saw this island in the distance and...and I think I'm in your dream!"

"WOAH! THAT'S AWESOME!" Luffy clapped his hands happily.
"Dude, we look the same age now!"

"I know! That's super weird!"

"Who is that, Luffy?" the boy named Sabo asked, clearly curious. "Is he after our treasure?"

"Nah! This is Steven! He's my nakama!" Luffy explained. "Steven, that is Ace and Sabo!"

"We've met...in real life," Ace smirked. "It's been awhile...depending on how you want to look at it!"

"That's right! You guys did meet! Man, almost all of my favorite people are here! Now we just need the rest of the crew and we can have ourselves a proper party!"

"Um...hello, Sabo," Steven walked over and extended his hands.
"How come I haven't met you before?"

"Eh, don't worry about that. Do you want some meat? We've got the finest food the Kingdom of Meat can offer!" Sabo directed the question.

"A kingdom of meat?! Luffy, you have to show me around this wonderful place!" Steven grinned.

"That's a great idea! 'Operation: Explore The Kingdom of Meat' is a go!" Luffy announced.

GWMAPT

After what seemed to be hours of searching and palling around in Luffy's dream, Steven was overjoyed. Though he still did not know much about Sabo, he thought that he was super cool. He seemed to follow his own rules and took to Steven the second Luffy announced that he was his nakama. The half-Gem was unsure if this would actually be the real Sabo's response if/when he met him or if this was just a part of Luffy's dream. Either way, it was an enjoyable time.

"Oh my gosh! Look! Bacon-birds!" Steven pointed to bird-like creatures that had bacon-wings.

"Yes! Bacon-birds are delicious!" Luffy began to salivate. He began to stretch his arm out to catch one, but Steven jumped in front of him.

"No! You can't hurt him! He is just trying to live his bacon-life! He never hurt anybody!" Steven pleaded.

"...are you going to befriend EVERY edible thing on this island?" Sabo asked. "You are gonna make us starve!"

"But even living dream-animals deserve the chance to live their lives!"

Luffy stared eagerly at the bird and sighed as he let it fly away. "Ugh! What's the point of being here if I can't eat anything!"

"Don't say that!" Steven told him. "It's your dream! I am sure there are non-animal things that we can eat...like the mountains or something!"

"But if it's my dream, shouldn't I get the final say?"

"I mean...if you want to eat the bacon-bird..." Steven stared down at his feet and looked embarrassed.

"No...no, you're right. Guys, let's split-up and bring back the best non-living animal meat you can find! I think we have got enough time for one more feast before I apparently wake back up!"

"Whatever you say, little bro," Ace smirked. "We meet back here in ten minutes?"

"I like it! Whoever gets the most meat gets to eat first!" Sabo suggested. "Anyone have a problem with that?"

After nobody voiced their objections, the four of them split-up. Steven began to fly around using his newly created rocket boots to get the best possible view of the meat island. It was truly a sight to behold. The young half-Gem was all prepared to return back to the

group empty-handed (everything was too cute to eat...even the rib rocks), until he spotted something out of the corner of his eye. "Is that a door?"

Landing in a secluded part of the island, Steven was surprised to find a door carved in the side of some rocks. Unlike a large majority of the dream-island, this appeared to be actual rocks and not made of substances that the dream version of Steven could eat. "Why would Luffy's dream contain a door like this?" Steven asked himself. "I wonder what's behind here..."

Debating with himself for a moment, Steven decided to open the door. He was confident that Luffy wouldn't have anything too dangerous lurking in his dreams. He was always so upbeat and carefree. The youth peered in and saw it was an empty hallway. "Huh...is this a dream within a dream? Does Luffy even know that he is dreaming this?" Steven asked, confused about dream-mechanics. Regardless, he strolled down the hallway and looked around.

The hallway was mostly pristine and clean, though Steven was drawn to things that appeared to be lined up on the walls. Steven saw three small cups sprawled on the floor, a set of sharp teeth, and something that made Steven stop. The half-Gem bent down and picked up a familiar golden hook. There was no mistaking what this was. "Codfish? What is this place?"

Beginning to worry, Steven started to back away. However, a voice filled the air. It was soft and high pitched, similar to a small child. "Hungry. Want food."

Against his better judgement, Steven walked past a few other trinkets in the hallway and found the source of the noise. It was a small flower. It had yellow petals with red at the joints and two red dots on each petal. There also appeared to be a white handkerchief draping down on its green stem. However, what Steven at ease was its face. It was basically a small smiley face, like the famous pins. "Oh! Hello, little guy! You look so cute!"

"Hungry!" it repeated, giving Steven an adorable smile that hit him in all the right places.

"Do you want to come outside? We are on an island of meat, so there has to be something good for you! How did you get in here?" Steven asked.

"Take me! Pick me!" the flower smiled.

"Sure!" Steven prepared to pick it up when a voice yelled to him.

"STEVEN! DO NOT TOUCH THAT FLOWER!"

He whipped around and saw Luffy. He was no longer the young child he saw before, but rather the normal version he knew in real life. But the most jarring thing was his expression. There was no hint of joy on his face. Luffy was simultaneously fearful and angry. In fact, he was angrier than he ever saw him before.

"Luffy! I...I..." Steven couldn't get any words out of his mouth before he heard more noise from behind him. Still expecting to see the flower, Steven let out a loud scream. The flower had lost all of its petals and was now growing and contouring into a fearsome monster. The fallen petals then turned into dozens of white butterflies that began to surround the pair, leaving enough room to see the beast. It towered over Steven and Luffy, salivating all the while. Steven had seen some scary things before when facing Corrupted Gems, but they were nothing.

This dream had turned into a nightmare.

"FEED!" the flower creature cried as it lunged at Steven through the butterflies, forcing him to create a dream version of his bubble. The half-Gem was truly shaken by the intensity of the flower's attacks. It pounced on his protective casing with increased speed and power. Suddenly, it was punched away by Luffy's outstretched arm.

"GUM-GUM PISTOL!" Luffy roared in anger.

The flower started to pick itself up, giving Steven enough time to roll over to Luffy. "What is that thing?! What's going on?!"

"Lily Carnation," Luffy growled.

"We've...we've got to calm it down! It wants to eat us!"

"There isn't calming it down or talking to it! Once it starts, it will never stop!" Luffy prepared to begin his attacks again. "What are you even doing here?! How did you get here?!"

"I don't know!" Steven felt like crying out of shame. "There was this door and then the flower called to me and..."

"It doesn't matter anymore! We need to leave...now!" Luffy commanded, pointing to the door.

"Maybe we should form Dream-Lufven?" Steven suggested, hoping that Luffy would say yes. This creature truly scared him, but he thought that their combined form would make this an easy fight before waking back up.

"NO! WE ARE NOT FORMING LUFVEN AGAIN!" Luffy yelled at the boy, causing Steven to fall back in horror. Steven could not form thoughts but instead stared into his eyes. They were different... compelling even. Something had snapped in Dream-Luffy. He didn't know what it was, but this entire situation made Steven want to cry. What did he mean by that? Did he no longer want to fuse with him? Before he could ask, Steven watched Luffy's face immediately fall. "...no! No! Get away!"

Steven saw that the young versions of Ace and Sabo had arrived at the door and had entered the hallway. The boy had never seen Luffy act this way before. He seemed more than concerned about this "Lily Carnation" than both Wapol and Crocodile combined. What was this thing? As Steven tried to articulate that question without crying, he watched in horror as a tall, lean man with a triangle shaped head and a pointy black goatee appeared from the ground, seemingly from the roots of the flower. The man grabbed the two boys and wordlessly began to bring them over to the flower, ignoring the struggling sensation from them.

"ACE?! SABO!" Luffy screamed as he tried punching the man. He ignored the attack and prepared to feed the boys to the flower. "I WON'T LOSE YOU AGAIN!"

Seeing that Luffy was struggling to face this creature, Steven ignored his emotions and dropped the bubble. Realizing that all of

this was from the flower, he summoned his shield and threw it at the stalk. Steven shut his eyes in time to hide the terrible sight happening in front of him. The shield cut through the flower and caused it to become a disgusting pile of goop. At the same time, the gentleman carrying the two boys withered away into nothingness. All that remained were the butterflies, though they were no longer aggressively surrounding them. By the time Steven opened up his eyes, he witnessed Luffy staring at a reborn version of the flower, silent and beaten. He raised up his shoe and stepped on it.

"You need to wake up now," Luffy told him. "Go."

"Luffy, I know I shouldn't have opened up the door! I didn't know this was in here! I'm sorry! Please don't hate me! I..." Steven stammered.

"JUST WAKE UP!"

GWMAPT

Steven woke up in a pile of sweat.

He searched around the room and saw that everyone was still asleep in the men's quarters. Everyone, that is, except for Luffy. He looked like he just woke up as well and was panting incredibly hard. He stared at his hands and began to clench them into fists. "... Luffy?" Steven asked weakly.

The captain turned his head sharply in Steven's direction and said nothing for a long while. Finally, in a shaky voice, he produced words. "That really happened, didn't it?"

Steven nodded weakly.

"I didn't want you to see that...you shouldn't have known..." Luffy ran his hands through his hair. "Are you okay?"

"I...I don't know," Steven admitted, tears forming from his eyes. "What was that? What happened to you?"

"I don't want to talk about it...please don't bring it up," Luffy pleaded.

"But..but why? Please Luffy, I want to know! I want to help!" Steven locked eyes with him to show him how serious he was. "I need to know!"

The captain thought about it and stared at him in silence before finally giving a short nod. "Not here..." Luffy got up and grabbed his hat. "Come on. We are taking a trip."

"What?"

"We are going on shore for a private talk," Luffy explained in a solemn voice. "Captain's orders."

Steven was a bit concerned about this sudden request, but he trusted Luffy's judgment about things. It looked like he was about to get some answers about what happened in the dream. Of note, he could not stop thinking about Lufven. Was fusion a bond the two of them would never share again?

They made it to the deck and saw that the only beings awake were Garnet, Pearl, and Peridot. The three seemed to be engaged in a heated discussion with Peridot still trying to badger them with questions. Despite feeling sleep deprived, Steven could appreciate Peridot's attempts at understanding the other Gems. Pearl was the first one to notice that they were awake and ran over to them. "Steven! Luffy! What are you two doing awake? I thought that Sanji was the only one who wakes up this early to cook! The sun only just started to rise and..."

"We are going to that island," Luffy explained. "Steven wants to train."

"Train? Hmm...using that island for now would be better than the confined space of the ship," Pearl thought about it. "That is an excellent idea! I believe..."

"Pearl, I think it's just going to be the two of us today," Steven explained. "I'm sorry! This is really important!"

"Leaving at the crack of dawn on an island of that size?!" Pearl shook her head. "Out of the question!"

"Pearl, let them be. Pirate Captain Luffy will be there. They can take care of themselves," Garnet gave them a wave. "Besides, you can't argue with the captain once he has made an order."

Pearl searched for an answer as she watched the two depart on a spare raft to the shore. In the end, she offered no objections and slumped back down on the floor to listen to Peridot pester her even more about how a Pearl could have an identity of their own when they were supposed to be servants to Homeworld Gems.

GWMAPT

After about a half hour of silent walking, Luffy finally stopped and motioned for Steven to take a seat on a rock. Steven obliged and took his place. "This is a nice island," Steven said, trying to diffuse the mood a bit.

"Yeah..." Luffy sighed. "Steven, let's talk about everything you saw...about everything that happened."

"I...whatever that was...it really bothered you, didn't it?" Steven asked, looking to his captain. The pirate was looking down at the dirt, uncomfortable and clearly more vulnerable than Steven was used to. Luffy was a pirate of action, so to see him in this way made the atmosphere unnerving. "I just want to be here for you...you can tell me anything! Think of me like a sponge!"

Luffy gave a small laugh, unusual for him. "'A sponge.' That's funny..."

"Luffy, I'm worried about you! We both have been feeling terrible all morning and we need to nip this in the bud! I don't want to feel like this...but your dream...I didn't mean to do that! I didn't even really know that I could do that! I went inside Lapis' head once...but I don't know how or why it happened. I wished that I could do that again so I could find her, but I didn't want to do that! I didn't want to break into your dreams without your permission!"

"Yeah...trying to think about it hurts!" Luffy admitted, shades of his usual personality shining through as he looked up at Steven again. "But don't worry about it happening. I mean, it started off as a great

dream! I love the meat kingdom dream! Sometimes I have it with the crew, sometimes with Shanks and the guys, but you caught me on an Ace day! Which...which means you caught me on a Sabo day too..." With that, the pirate's voice trailed away, leaving an awkward silence between the two friends.

Steven shifted around uncomfortably, trying to find the right words. "Who is he? How come we haven't met him yet?"

"Sabo...Sabo was a brother to me," Luffy bit his lip, his eyes returning to the ground. "He died when Ace and I were kids...it was one of the worst moments of my life. I only bounced back thanks to Ace, who reminded me to live a proud life...who reminded me to be free like Sabo wanted to be...I don't really talk about it..."

"I'm...I'm so sorry!" Steven gasped, tears already starting to form in his eyes. "I didn't...I mean..."

"I know. But now you know..." Luffy took off his hat and examined it, moving it around in his hands for a moment as he tried to find the right words to describe what he was about to tell Steven. "After we left you, we ended up having a bunch of fun adventures, like entering that race or searching for underwater treasure! We even had an amazing adventure on a sky island. It was so fun!"

"I heard about the sky Island from Zoro," Steven asked. "He mentioned that you faced a god or something there."

"Yup...I beat him and found a city of gold! Steven, you would have loved it!" Luffy stopped twiddling his hat and genuinely looked excited. "We rang the Golden Bell and everybody just was so happy! We were even happy when we landed in a Marine base after we fell back from the sky!"

"You got captured by Marines?! Why didn't anyone tell me that?!"

"I dunno...I guess we just got caught up with that seahorse and split-head. We had such a great time sneaking around that I was pumped for the next island...which was Omlette Island...or something like that..." In a second, the excitement in Luffy's eyes vanished and the somber attitude returned, catching Steven off-guard.

"That doesn't sound so bad!" Steven tried to lighten the mood, stopping when he locked eyes with his captain. He could tell that Luffy was clearly remembering something he did not want to and that it was bothering him. It became clear that this was not a time to try to add a hint of levity to their conversation. "What happened there?"

"I'm not that good at stories..." Luffy tried telling him, but it was clear Steven wanted some kind of explanation.

"Please?" Steven asked him in a whisper. Luffy thought about it for a second, and gave a small nod.

"It all started with this Baron-guy...he was the boss of the island with a weird little flower on his shoulder. He gave us the chance to relax as long as we did these games...it was kind of like the Davy Back Fight, but not as fun. Nami and the others tried talking me out of it... but I was too excited not to join in," Luffy explained.

There was a moment of silence as Luffy took a breath, and closed his eyes. "I was having a great time, but he was turning us all against each other...I didn't even notice when everybody started going missing! I can still hear Sanji calling me out on it...I don't think I will ever forget it..." Luffy grabbed his shorts tightly, trying to keep it together, his face looking back toward the ground. "In the end, our friends nearly died because I wanted to play the game...the Lilly Carnation won..."

"The flower!" Steven whispered in fear. "So that means that guy with the facial hair..."

"Yup. That was him. That flower was...was eating our nakama. I saw them slowly dying in front of my eyes."

"What...what did you do?" Steven whispered, enraptured in the story despite being greatly unnerved at the subject matter.

"I punched the Baron so hard in the face that I...that I killed him," Luffy bit his lip and sighed in resignation.

"What?! You killed him?!" Steven shook his head in utter disbelief.

He reached out to Luffy to try to put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Maybe...maybe it was an accident!"

"No," Luffy raised his head and looked out toward the sea that could barely be seen through the trees. "I killed him."

His hand paused midair, Steven did not know how to react. He knew that Luffy had the capacity to take a life, as proven by their serious discussions right before landing on Drum Island, but he never wanted to think of him as a killer. The happy, carefree pirate who always smiled and ate large meals killed a man and didn't even show it until just now? It made no sense...until it did. "Wait, what was that hallway?"

"I don't really know, but I think they are my bad memories. I don't like talking about a lot of that stuff...but it's there, I guess," Luffy explained with a shrug, still staring outward and ignoring Steven's paused gesture.

However, the half-Gem placed his hand on Luffy's shoulder and moved closer to him. "If you ever do...I'm here for you."

Luffy gave a smile and patted Steven's hand. "I know."

The two sat together in silence for several minutes, processing what was said and dealing with the fact that it was said at all. It spoke volumes that Luffy was not crying at the thought of such dark memories, but Steven knew him enough to know that he might as well be doing it. This was Luffy at his most vulnerable and he was sharing it with Steven to help him understand...and maybe to understand it better himself.

"Can I...?" Steven started to ask before hesitating, wishing to give Luffy time it looked like he needed. "Can I ask a question?"

The future Pirate King nodded, turning his gaze toward the half-Gem. Steven, fidgeting in place himself, gulped before he spoke again. "Why didn't anyone say anything? Is it...is it just because you did...did that?"

"No...it's because...uh...I dunno," Luffy admitted, scratching his

head. "Nobody really remembered what happened. When the flower died, everyone just thought they had a long dream. I didn't want to talk about it with anyone...well, except for Genevieve. I couldn't stop thinking about this, so I asked her to use her paints to help me...I guess push aside everything in my head."

"So the cave...the cave was probably from her!" Steven realized, everything clicking in place. "I can't even begin to imagine what you are going through. I'm so sorry I opened it up! I'm so sorry you are hurting!"

"Don't be sorry...be Steven. You're my friend and nakama. I'd do anything for my friends!" Luffy gave a weak smile before slumping back down. "I'd do anything for you guys...because I don't want to lose you. To be alone without your friends...it's hell...I'd rather die than lose you all..."

"Stop it!" Steven grabbed his shoulders, causing Luffy to jump in shock. "Don't you ever say that, do you hear me?! Living is a beautiful thing! Be proud of it, just like Ace said! You aren't alone anymore, Luffy! The crew would never abandon you...I'd never truly abandon you! I don't have any brothers or sisters, but you guys are like the siblings I never had! It doesn't matter that we will have to cross dimensions to do it, we will always be there for each other!"

"Steven..." Luffy sniffled, fighting back tears.

"I am and will always be your friend and nakama! Straw Hats for life!" Steven raised his arm up, symbolic of the markings from Alabasta that proved their eternal friendship to Vivi.

"Staw Hats for life!" Luffy finally smiled and hugged him. The second the two embraced, Steven's gem glowed bright and, almost instantaneously, the two of them disappeared. In their place was a single being...

"We...we formed Lufven!" the fusion looked down, bewildered and amazed. "I thought you said that we weren't going to form us again! I..."

As quickly as Lufven appeared, he disappeared back into Steven

and Luffy. The two panted and looked at each other. Now it was Steven's turn to look hurt. "Luffy, I didn't mean..."

"No, no, no," Luffy shook his head. "You misunderstood me. I was meaning that we weren't going to form Lufven then in that moment... but I think you need to know something."

"I heard about how that guy made you feel," Steven explained. "Zoro told me that it was bothering you..."

"Steven, fusion is awesome! I love it! I love Lufven! I...I just also need to know that I can fight my own fights too. When we fought that hippo-guy, Lufven kicked ass. But Crocodile...we didn't need to fuse then. We could have tag-teamed him and taken him down together. It just sounded so cool at the time, and it seemed like we could solve all of our problems with it! Instead...instead we got stabbed."

"I know...but what does that mean? Do...do you not want to fuse with me anymore?"

"What I mean is that Lufven is benched...for now," Luffy sat down and looked up at the sky. "It has nothing to do with me wanting to fuse with you or anything. We need to get stronger together. When we fight together, that is what I want us to do: I want us to fight side by side like friends...like brothers! But rest assured: when the time is right, Lufven will kick ass again!"

"Brothers?" Steven repeated as he joined him.

"Brothers," Luffy smiled. "Now, let's never speak of that stupid flower or the Baron again! I'm starving and I'm tired of moping around! We've been sad long enough! Let's set sail today and do something fun! Do you have any ideas?"

"Hmm...it's hard to eat on an empty stomach. I think we need some Sanji food, don't you think?" Steven winked and rubbed his stomach.

"Now you are talking!" Luffy laughed. "Let's go get some breakfast!"

"You don't need to," a voice called from behind them. "I brought it for you."

The two got up and looked around. There was Connie, holding two wrapped up containers of food. She looked at them with a shocked expression. "Connie!" Steven yelled in surprise. "How long were you there?!"

"I came right around the time Luffy mentioned Genevieve painting," Connie looked at both of them. "I saw you...you fuse."

"Is...is that bad?" Steven asked, blushing.

"No," Connie shook her head, blushing herself. "I...I'm sorry for intruding on your private conversation. Pearl just said you were training and I volunteered to bring you breakfast after I woke up despite Pearl being against it and...and I was kind of hoping to train with you."

"Oh," Steven looked down at his feet. "I'm...I'm sorry."

"Don't be, your secret is safe with me guys. I won't tell anyone about the you-know-what," Connie crossed her heart. "So...can I train with you guys after you eat? Zoro is still asleep and I'd love to get a head start. I really want to better myself while I can!"

"I don't see why not! That sounds like fun to me!" Luffy grinned. "Shall we find a more open area to train?"

"After you, captain!" Steven and Connie said in unison.

"Then let's go!"

As the three of them searched the island for an open spot, Connie began to ask them about the fusing process. "So, how does it feel to be Lufven?"

"It's hard to describe...like being really best friends," Luffy shrugged, not knowing how to explain it. "It's fun to have Steven's voice in my head! Say, you and Steven fused, right? When am I going to see that?!"

Before Connie could respond, she held up her hands to get a better look at something out into the distance. "Is that a ship?"

Sure enough, the wreckage of a ship was not that far off on the island. The large trees hid the damage from the pirates before, but their walk had exposed them to it. Dropping the subject of fusion, the three ran over and got a look at it. The damage was extensive and there was no way that the vessel would ever sail again.

"What happened?" Steven asked.

"I think there was a storm here the day before we got here and fought Foxy," Luffy eagerly looked around. "It must have gotten destroyed in the storm and crashed here!"

"I hope nobody was hurt," Steven closed his eyes, praying for the best.

"Oh. My. Gosh," Connie squealed excitedly. "You guys are never going to guess what I found!"

"Food?" Luffy asked.

"An injured person?" Steven gulped.

"Nope," Connie pointed to the rubble. "It's a giant treasure chest! I found a pirate treasure!"

The males followed along and saw just that. It was a large chest wedged under some rubble. The three of them exchanged looks and knew exactly what needed to be done. "We need to tell Nami."

The Treasure Chest

"A treasure chest? On a shipwrecked ship?!" Nami shouted excitedly. "Do you understand what this means?!"

By the time Luffy, Steven, and Connie returned to the ship, nearly everyone was awake. Sanji had prepared coffee while Nami was examining her maps, much to Peridot's interest. It seemed as if the Homeworld Gem had decided to put her all into learning about how the Grand Line worked, probably at Robin's suggestion. Seeing her like that made Steven incredibly happy, but he had to focus on the important issue: the treasure chest. The mere mention of the word "treasure" was enough to cause Nami to abandon her project to get as much information as she could out of the three of them.

"That there is treasure?" Luffy asked.

"Exactly! This is everything I have ever dreamed of! A large treasure chest! By itself! Without anyone around to question our valid claim to it! Somebody pinch me!" Nami swooned theatrically.

"An odd request, but alright," Peridot shrugged and complied, causing Nami to hit her hand away.

"I wasn't being literal!"

"How was I supposed to know that?!" Peridot countered.

"It doesn't matter! I'm going to be rich! Rich, I tell you!" Nami laughed maniacally.

"Ugh, keep it down. Some of us are trying to sleep," Genevieve opened the door from the ladies' quarters, yawning and scratching her frizzy hair. She looked around and saw that practically everybody was already up. "...how you people can be up at this hour is beyond me."

"It's only nine in the morning," Garnet commented dryly.

"There's a nine in the morning?!" Genevieve asked.

"Apparently," Garnet responded.

"And they call us criminals," she shook her head. "Who is responsible for such a travesty?"

"That is one of life's great mysteries," Garnet nodded. "If you are to learn its answer, you must begin a long, tedious search for knowledge."

The painter blinked and grumbled to herself. "No thanks. Too much work. Just want tea."

"As I expected you would," Garnet pulled over a tea cup.

"...I will never get used to your Future Vision. Never," Genevieve eyed the cup and waited for Garnet to pass it over to her. Garnet, for her part, refused to move and the two stared intently at the tea to see who would break first.

"Can we focus back on what truly matters here?! There is a perfectly good treasure chest on that island that we are just letting rot away! Who knows what terrible criminals could try to claim it for themselves?!" Nami pointed toward the island. "To shore!"

"...I am not used to seeing her act as excited as the other knuckleheads," Greg observed as he took a bite of his eggs. "Here I thought she was the normal one."

"Normalcy is overrated," Robin chuckled.

"I don't understand why you are getting so worked up over this," Pearl frowned. "Aren't you currently carrying a horde of gold from your little 'sky island' escapade?"

"There is no such thing as too much gold!" Nami grinned.

"Tell that to King Midas," Connie said.

"If he pays enough for an audience with me, I'll do that and more! Now, get Zoro up! We've got work to do!" Nami yelled, rallying the others with her.

"Well...more gold does mean that we could potentially find more supplies for the drill..." Pearl observed. "Plus, I could use some time off of this ship."

"Treasure! Woohoo!" Steven cheered. He followed Nami excitedly, leaving only Garnet and Genevieve alone, still staring at the cup while engaging a battle of wills.

"You aren't giving up, are you?" Genevieve asked.

"Nope."

"...I hate you," Genevieve grabbed the cup, utilizing great effort to do so.

"No you don't," Garnet smiled.

GWMAPT

The crew made it to the wreckage of the ship in no time at all. Thanks to Nami's begging, Garnet was somehow convinced to carrying the treasure chest back to the ship, forcing the more cynical members to question why they even were asked to join in the walk. They got their answer in the form of Nami demanding them to search the wreckage for any other lost valuables. After an hour of searching yielded no results, the Straw Hats returned to the ship to open their prize.

"It's locked," Garnet commented after they returned.

"And you didn't try opening it?!" Nami yelled.

"You asked me to carry it. You didn't ask me to open it," Garnet pointed out.

"Ugh...Usopp, do your marksman thing and open that chest," Nami demanded.

"How is picking a lock considered a 'marksman thing?'" Usopp asked.

"Do you want a cut of this or not?" Nami narrowed her eyes.

"Jeez! Why do I even question you when you get like this?" Usopp shook his head and got to work.

"Just hurry it up and open it!"

"Don't rush me!"

"I can't believe that we found a real pirate treasure chest!" Connie clapped her hands excitedly. "This is the stuff that dreams are made of!"

"I can't believe that this is the first time we've actually come across treasure since becoming pirates," Greg admitted. "I would have thought that it was kind of a big deal in the pirating world."

"Don't undersell the importance of treasure!" Nami barked.

"What do you all want to do with your cut of the treasure?" Steven asked, looking eagerly at the box.

"I want some new books on medicine!" Chopper announced.

"Meat!" Luffy cried as he grabbed his stomach.

"I could use some fresh ingredients...and maybe a magazine or two," Sanji sighed and smiled. "That would be nice."

"I'm with him. As much as I love the materials in Beach City, you can't beat Grand Line cocoa," Petrea licked her lips.

"Wait, so there is currency inside of this chest?" Peridot asked, getting up close in Usopp's personal space as she examined the chest for herself. "Why would you keep it in a box that could get discarded so easily?"

"That's just how pirate treasure works, Peri," Amethyst laughed. "It wouldn't be the same if it wasn't in a chest!"

"...that didn't answer my question."

"What about you, dad?" Steven directed the question to his father.

"Me?" Greg thought about it for a moment. "Maybe a small souvenir or something. I don't need anything big or fancy. The memories are all the treasure I need."

"Aw!" Steven blushed. "You're the best, dad!"

"Not even close, kiddo," Greg laughed and hugged his son.

Before anyone else could chime in, a clicking sound was heard. All eyes fell on Usopp, who was grinning. "Well, everyone...are you ready for this?!"

"Treasure!" Steven and Nami yelled at once.

Dramatically, Usopp lifted the top of the treasure chest open. Even the most uninterested Straw Hats eagerly looked on with anticipation to see the spoils of their efforts. "Feast your eyes on...on...what?"

The treasure chest was full to the brim, but it was not with treasure. Rather, it was some kind of tan, hairy material. As the pirates stared blankly at the sight, Usopp tugged at the hair with all of his might. After a few pulls, he managed to get a better look at the contents of the chest. It was a small, elderly woman. She had red blush and lipstick on her wrinkly face and wore a black and purple dress. Her tan hair was done up into four large curls with a purple bow. Coughing a bit and blinking several times, the woman smiled and waved. "Hi! Hi!"

Without hesitation, Usopp did the only sensible thing and shut the woman back into the treasure chest and proceeded to wrap it up using some spare string that was lying around. Luffy, following his lead, picked up the chest as was prepared to throw it overboard. Before he could do so, he was stopped by Steven and the Gems.

"What on earth are you doing?! That human could be seriously injured!" Pearl freaked out.

"But it's not treasure!" Luffy pouted.

"That doesn't mean throw her away!" Pearl tried to grab the chest away, causing the two of them to engage in a tug-of-war. "You could kill her, or at least damage her fragile body!"

"But she's not treasure!" Luffy repeated.

"Luffy, you have no idea how long that woman might have been in there! She needs medical attention!" Connie begged him.

"Luffy..." Steven folded his arms and tapped his foot.

"But..." Luffy whined.

"Luffy..." Steven continued.

"Do I have to?"

"Luffy!"

"...okay, you win," Luffy sighed and put the treasure chest down. In a flash, Pearl cut away the rope and pulled the woman out of the chest again.

"Of all the reckless...ma'am, are you injured?" Pearl asked the woman, who had yet to open her eyes. "Ma'am? We have a reindeer doctor if you require medical assistance!"

Suddenly, the woman popped her eyes open and got up to stretch. "Ah! I needed that! Thanks, missy!"

"Wha...? But...but you were trapped in a treasure chest for...what did you say, at least two days! Surely you must have suffered brain damage or some other ailment!" Pearl could not believe the sight in front of her eyes.

"Welcome to the Grand Line, Pearl," Robin began to laugh to herself. "Logic has no place here."

"I...now I know how Peridot must feel," Pearl ran her hands in her hair.

"Who cares about her health?!" Nami barged over. "I want to know why you were in that treasure chest!"

"Oh? Me?" the old woman asked, starting to get nervous. "I...I was attacked by pirates on my travels and...and I hid in the pirate chest

to escape before the storm hit...and..."

"And you threw out the treasure to make room for yourself?" Nami rubbed her eyes.

"...yes," the old woman gulped. "...I take it you are all pirates too?"

"Don't worry about that," Usopp handwaved it. "Group huddle!"

Leaving the woman aside, the Straw Hats gathered in a large circle and began to whisper to each other. "She knows we are pirates. What do we do with her?" Usopp asked.

"Why don't we just drop her off at the next island we sail to?" Petrea asked. "We saved her life. What reason would she have to cause trouble for us?"

"I don't like it. It'll raise too many questions," Zoro frowned. "I say we just throw her back in the box and leave her on the island."

"That's not nice!" Steven argued. "Why don't we ask her to be a part of our crew?"

"Out of the question!" Nami yelled. "She threw away perfectly valuable treasure! I can't sail with a person who can do that!"

"Why don't you just bring her to that ice bridge the admiral dude made and have her take it to that other island?" Amethyst suggested.

"I am NOT going back there!" Usopp yelled. "That place was too scary!"

"Some brave warrior of the sea you are," Sanji pointed out.

"SHUT UP!" Usopp snarled.

As they conferred with each other on how best to help/ leave the newest guest of the ship, the old woman in question began to bounce up and down, begging the Straw Hats not to kill her or abandon her. Finally, it was Greg who put his foot down. "Alright, that's it! People, stop and think about this! It doesn't matter if it stirs

up trouble; this woman needs our help! Look at her! She's scared stiff!"

"Maybe of Zoro's face," Damian muttered to himself.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?!" Zoro grabbed Damian's collar angrily.

"Who cares about treasure?" Greg ignored the two and continued his pleas. "You guys have plenty of it! I say we take her to wherever we are going and take it from there! It is the right thing to do and you know it!"

Before anyone could comment on Greg's heartfelt statement, the old woman stopped her bouncing and widened her eyes. "Oh! Treasure? You guys want treasure? Maybe we can make a deal! If you bring me home, I can give you as much treasure as you can imagine!"

Sensing an opportunity, Nami immediately detached herself from the huddle and sauntered over to her. "I can imagine quite a bit. How much treasure are we talking here?" She towered over the woman, who continued to look terrified. "You reek of suspicion. Do you honestly expect me to believe that you would suddenly remember about a treasure horde just when it conveniently suits you?"

"I have never seen the navigator this...this engaged before," Peridot gulped. "She's terrifying!"

"She's gonna hurt that lady!" Steven worried.

"She's hilarious!" Amethyst cheered Nami on. "Yo, painter girl! You should totally paint Nami owning this lady!"

"Already on it," Genevieve grabbed her materials in a flash, surprising the Straw Hats even more than they were by Nami's actions as she went straight to work capturing this moment for Amethyst.

"Look, you know that we are pirates, right? Do you know what pirates do to liars? I assure you that you don't!" Nami gained an evil glimmer in her eyes and smile as the old woman began to sweat bullets.

"I...I am not okay with how this conversation is turning," Greg started to back away. "She was trying to make a deal with us!"

"It isn't a deal anymore," Garnet commented on it. "The navigator is in control of the conversation. There isn't anything to be worried about here."

"Tell that to her," Petrea pointed to the woman. "That woman is terrified of Nami."

"And you aren't?!" Damian countered.

"I guess my face isn't the terrifying one anymore, now is it?" Zoro smirked.

"I'm not lying! On my island, we have a legendary treasure that is yours for the taking: the Golden Crown! Only the King of the Seas can wear it!" the woman explained, catching Nami's attention.

"You mean that monster Sanji cooked for my parents?" Connie asked.

"That would be a sea king. It's probably different...right?" Sanji posed the question.

"And how much is this crown of yours worth?" Nami pried.

"No, it is not a sea king and I can honestly say I have never actually seen the crown...but it is worth more than any sum of money!"

"Do you honestly expect us to fall for that?" Pearl shook her head.

"See? Even Pearl agrees with me!" Nami put her hands on her hip.

"But...but..." the woman stammered, looking fearful.

Pearl, sensing the fright, knelt down and put her hand on the woman's shoulder. "Ma'am, you don't have to worry. You have nothing to fear from us. There is no need to trick us with such an obvious lie that only children would..."

"Oh my gosh! This sounds like it could be an amazing adventure!"

Steven's eyes lit up with stars.

"A golden crown that can only be worn by a king!" Chopper exclaimed, equally in awe.

"'King of the Seas' has such a great ring to it!" Luffy folded his arms and laughed. "I can't wait to go find it!"

"You...you can't be serious," Pearl's eye twitched.

"No! No, Luffy! Don't say it!" Nami turned around sharply. "Please don't say it!"

"Set a course for that old lady's island!" Luffy raised his fist triumphantly.

"He said it," Genevieve said from her canvas, making some final adjustments to her painting. "Say, could you make that scary face again?"

"NO!" Nami started to cry. "His mind is made up...there's no stopping him!"

"But what if her island is completely out of the way?!" Pearl asked, her mind wracked with questions. "Committing to this task, however noble, is not something you should do lightly! There are so many variables that need to be considered and..."

"But it sounds like fun!" Luffy grinned. "And fun is just what we need around here! The past few days have been too sad for me! We could use a great adventure!"

"I'm game! I haven't been on one of your wacky adventures from beginning to end before!" Amethyst added. "Come on, P! What's the worst that could happen?"

"I...the Cluster..." Pearl started before taking a deep breath. "You know what? We will be fine. I think a good, old fashioned pirate crusade will be a good change of pace for us all."

"Really?" Zoro snorted. "YOU think that?"

"I'll have you know, I crossed cutlasses with several human pirates well before you were born," Pearl grinned. "Not every human we encountered was as timid as William Dewey back in those days...the dark days of human combat when sword fighting was turning from an art form to a sad shadow of its former self. Ah, how I flourished..."

"...I...I have no comment," Zoro shook his head as Amethyst, Usopp, and Damian started to roar with laughter.

"But this seems like there isn't going to be that kind of an adventure," Petrea pointed out. "We are just bringing her back and collecting our reward...right?"

"Please, I might not have traveled with you all for long, but I know that whenever you all set out for an adventure, the chances of fighting are always incredibly high," Pearl smirked. "It is better just to run with it at this point and not to fight it for once."

"I can't argue with that logic," Petrea conceded. "Fair point."

"I must admit, the idea of a legendary crown is something that interests me," Robin stroked her chin. "I am sure it tells a fascinating tale."

"It does?" Peridot asked quickly. "Well then, I too am excited for the 'pirating adventure!'"

"Alright, Peridot! This is great!" Steven clapped his hands.

"Yes. I am great," Peridot grinned to herself.

"So where exactly do you live, lady?" Luffy asked.

"A better question would be if you possess an Eternal Pose to your home," Nami corrected him.

"What's an Eternal Pose?" Steven asked.

"Remember when Crocodile gave us that Log Pose to Alabasta? That was an Eternal Pose," Petrea explained. "It's a Log Pose that points only to one place."

"I understand!" the half-Gem nodded.

"To answer your question, no. I don't have one," the lady replied.
"But we don't need one."

"I must have misheard you," Nami shook her head in disbelief. "We are in the Grand Line. Without a Log Pose or an Eternal Pose, we...what are you doing?"

The woman proceeded to pull out a small, boxlike contraption and opened it up. Inside was a small baby sea turtle floating in a pool of water with the face of a compass. "Our island uses a Turtle Pose. We don't have a magnetic signature to pick up like regular islands do...I guess. I don't really know how it works, but you can't get back there without one."

"I want one!" Steven whispered as he began to pet the turtle gently.

"...I'd ask if that was logical, but this crazy place makes no sense whatsoever. Why would this be any different?" Peridot threw her hands up in defeat.

"You are learning," Robin smiled.

"So how does this 'Turtle Pose' work?" Nami asked, simultaneously curious and leery.

"The turtle inside is drawn to the placement of the island. If you sail in the direction that it is pointing, you'll reach it in no time at all," she explained.

"This just makes this trip sound that much more awesome!" Luffy started to bounce in place.

"But this could all be for nothing!" Nami protested.

"Who cares! I'd rather the guys get back to Beach City on a happy note! If this ends up being as fun of a time as I expect it to be, it will all be worth it! Besides, you heard her: she said there could be treasure!" Luffy grinned. "Pirates just can't pass up an offer like that!"

Stretching his arms, Luffy propelled himself up to his favorite seat: the top of Merry's sheep figurehead. "Man the helm!"

"Pirate adventure!" Steven and Connie shouted in unison.

"Yes! A pirate adventure!" Pearl clumsily added as she looked off into the distance. "What a grand adventure it will be!"

"...you are trying way too hard," Usopp sighed.

The Gem's face fell slightly as her cheeks turned blue. "Is it that obvious?"

"Yes," everyone said at once.

"That's fine by me!" Luffy called down. "Let's all get excited! Set sail to wherever that turtle is pointing!"

GWMAPT

The trip to the island did not last longer than a day and a half. In that time, the Going Merry was bustling with activity. Connie, Zoro, and Pearl took the time to train with each other in whatever space they could come by, which mainly meant practicing katas and stances. Robin listened endlessly to Peridot explaining the various workings of Homeworld, compiling the information down in a journal. Chopper managed to create some medicine to fully rejuvenate the old woman, whose name turned out to be Roba. Usopp also started tinkering with his own, small pet project that looked somewhat similar to the Clima Tact weapon he created for Nami before reaching Alabasta. Peridot, taking a reprieve from her conversation, examined the "primitive" tool and offered her advice on how to improve its design. After showing his thanks and implementing her suggestions into the tool, Peridot would not stop grinning. This brought endless enjoyment to Amethyst, who spent her time between posing in wacky positions for Genevieve to paint like she used to do for Vidalia and pranking the others.

For the first time in days, there was some much-needed levity on the Going Merry.

Finally, their destination was in sight. A small island appeared in the

distance and Nami directed them towards it with great speed. As they neared it, they passed by a fisherman casting his net out into the sea. The man was singing to himself. It was a tune that caught the crew's ears almost immediately: *"Swaying, swaying, swaying! The King of the Seas; the Golden Crown! Swaying, swaying, swaying! If you listen close, you'll hear the sound! White snake eyes, two moons up there, the sound of the black wind, feeling lighter than air..."*

"Even though this is a summer island, I can't help but notice that there is snow on the peak...how peculiar..." Robin muttered to herself.

"That song mentioned the crown!" Pearl said excitedly, clearly trying to get as involved in this adventure as she could. "That means that this wasn't just a waste of our time at all! Isn't this fun?"

"...dial it back a notch, P," Amethyst warned her. "You'll wear yourself out or something."

"So, what was that song?" Greg asked, trying to recreate the tune by humming it. "It was catchy."

"It's a folk song here," Roba explained. "Everyone knows it!"

Pearl's smile slowly began to falter. "You don't mean...you didn't just get your information about the crown from that song, did you?"

"I did."

"I...that is to say...oh no," Pearl sank to the floor. "I knew this was pointless! I...no...keep it together for Steven and for the captain. Remember the promise to yourself to keep a positive attitude, Pearl. You can do this..."

"I think Pearl's broken," Genevieve pointed at her.

"I KNEW THIS WAS BULLSHIT!" Nami growled at Luffy. "DAMN IT, LUFFY!"

"But the treasure is real!" Roba insisted.

Taking a drag from his cigarette, Sanji sighed. "So, does this island have a name?"

"Mecha Island," she replied.

"MECHA ISLAND?!" Steven, Connie, and Peridot shouted in unison.

"Is there going to be giant robots here?!" Steven asked excitedly. "I want to see a giant robot fight!"

"Think of the mechanics behind their machines! Grand Line robotics: it could be beautiful!" Peridot swooned. "Produce the robots, human! Where are they?"

"Uh, not to rain on your parade, but the name doesn't exactly seem to fit the landscape," Usopp pointed out. He acknowledged the village that could be seen from the distance. Most of the homes appeared to be made of stone. "This seems far more laid back than something called 'Mecha Island' suggests. Honestly, it's rather calming."

"Hmm..." Garnet adjusted her shades. "That's a nice change of pace for once."

"Where should we dock?" Usopp asked. "We can't just brazenly display our pirate ship anywhere. Most people tend to frown upon a Jolly Roger."

"True," Roba nodded. "How about that beach up ahead?"

"The one with the weird stuff?" Luffy asked, pointing to an odd looking contraption lining the shore. It appeared mechanical in design, but it was too far away to be certain.

"What is that? Is that some kind of human machine?" Pearl peered over the side.

"Yes! The mechanical aspects of this island are showing itself already!" Peridot gleefully commented.

"That? That is my son's doing," Roba shook her head. "Ever since his father died, he has been assembling junk nonstop. He's become

a man obsessed with a passion. At first I didn't mind it, since he has been skilled with machinery since he was young, but I wish he would shift his focus elsewhere."

"What is it?!" Peridot pressed the issue. "A weapon?!"

"I think it is a defense system or something...oh! See?" Roba pointed to it, acknowledging the now-moving machinery. At once, the sand from the beach lifted to reveal dozens of mechanical archers aiming their weapons directly at the oncoming ship.

"ROBOTS!" Steven, Connie, and Peridot cried with joy.

"Wait...robots?" Connie snapped out of her excitement to realize just what was happening. "Defense system?! They are going to fire on us!"

"GAH! IF THEY ATTACK, WE ARE DEAD!" Usopp ran around in circles.

"But I can just use my shield to protect us!" Steven reminded him.

"Nah. Pearl and I can handle this," Zoro grabbed his swords. "Unless you'd rather just let me show you how it's done."

"In your dreams, ruffian," Pearl smiled as she produced her blade. "Connie, take the opportunity to observe what Zoro and I are about to do. Note our forms and our stances."

"Yes, ma'am!" Connie saluted.

"Just remember one thing: when I am in your world, I won't yell my attacks. When you are here, it's just accepted that you will," Zoro smirked.

"I...ugh! It seems so unnecessary!" Pearl frowned. "Fine! I'll play along!"

"...what?" Damian blinked, looking around. "What the hell is even happening?"

"It seems like we have got some motivation," Garnet smiled. "This

looks like it could be fun."

"Hmm..." Damian cracked his neck. "I could use a little fun."

From the shore, an intercom appeared and a voice blared out to them. "Welcome to Mecha Island! You can't win, pirates! What exactly are you here for? Don't think you are going to lay your evil hands on our beloved island! You will not step foot on Lord Ratchet's sacred land without his express permission! Leave now or prepare for death from above!"

"Wow. Scary," Amethyst picked her nose. "I'm shaking in my boots."

"Hold it guys," Steven begged Pearl and Zoro. "Maybe we don't have to fight! Why don't we just tell them that we have Roba and are here to bring her home?"

"An excellent idea, Steven," Pearl lowered her staff.

"Uh...excuse me!" Luffy yelled out to the shore. "We may be pirates, but we aren't here to rob you or anything! We just came across this old lady and just wanted to bring her home!" With that, Luffy grabbed Roba and held her up high. "See?"

After a moment of silence, the loud voice continued to shout over the water. "You bastards better not have harmed her! Give her back, now!"

"...I have a feeling we aren't being told everything," Garnet folded her arms.

"I agree," Nami nodded. "Just who exactly are you, Roba?"

Before she could respond, what appeared to be a man on a propeller-run hang glider started to approach them. The man appeared to be wearing glasses and looked a bit lanky. "Mom...it's me! I'm coming!"

"THAT IS AWESOME!" Steven, Chopper, Luffy, and Connie shouted.

"Meh; it is an antique," Peridot admitted. "Still...fascinating to see,

nevertheless."

In a flash, the man on the glider swooped in and grabbed Roba away. However, most of the Straw Hats were too distracted to notice or care.

"What was that thing?!" Nami looked around, but everybody was too busy admiring the craft.

"I don't know...but I want to paint it," Genevieve grabbed a brush and started working.

"Damn beautiful!" Damian removed his sunglasses to get a better look at it.

"That is awesome," Garnet nodded.

"I just got the best idea for a song," Greg muttered to himself in awe.

"IS EVERYONE ON THIS SHIP GOING TO GO CRAZY FOR THAT THING?!" Nami shouted angrily.

"You have to admit that it is cool," Zoro observed.

"I concur," Pearl nodded. "It is charming in a primitive way."

"That man called her 'mom,' didn't he?" Robin frowned. "Something isn't right."

They watched as the hang glider landed on the shot on what appeared to be a mine cart of some kind. The second it landed, the boisterous voice spoke again. As the ship was now closer, it became clear that the voice belonged to a man with blue, fin-like hair and a purple tattoo on his chest that was seen thanks to his green jacket being unbuttoned. "You fools better start cowering in your boots! You are all dead! Dead! D. E. A. D! I'd tell you to start saying prayers, but by the time you start doing it, you'll already be in hell!"

The sky quickly began to darken, but not with clouds. Rather, over a thousand arrows began to descend upon the Going Merry at once. Rather than panic, all eyes turned to Pearl and Zoro. The two looked

rather confidentially at the oncoming attack and smiled.

"This is it?" Zoro asked.

"Hardly seems worth it," Pearl commented.

"Single Sword..." Zoro yelled with all of his might. **"Thirty-Six Caliber Phoenix!"**

"Pearl Parry!" Pearl cried theatrically.

The two attacked the air itself, causing the arrows to stop their momentum and fall into the sea. The Straw Hats redirected their awe from the hang glider to the two swordsmen, watching as Pearl began to laugh to herself. "I must admit: it's catchy!"

"See? Don't knock it until you try it," Zoro grinned.

"I can't believe that they just deflected all of those arrows like that," Usopp said as his jaw dropped.

"Um...buddy?" Greg pointed to Usopp's hat, which had an arrow going directly through it.

"GAH! I'VE BEEN HIT!" Usopp panicked.

"It's just your hair and hat!" Greg reminded him.

"THANK GOD!"

The Cryptic Swaying Song

The pirates on the Going Merry waited patiently for the next attack. Surely a single volley of arrows would not be enough to defend an entire island. As it stood, all of them had questions that they wanted answers for; specifically, what was going on, who was that man who took Roba, and where could they get a glider of their own.

The questions were not limited to the pirates alone. On the shore, the blue-haired man who manned the weapons system stared at the pirate ship with shock. "WHAT THE HELL?! WHAT DID THEY EVEN DO?!"

"Why are you just standing around, General Maji?" a voice called to him.

Maji, the man in question, looked up to the mine cart where the glider landed to see two occupants driving away. One was Roba and the other was the driver of the glider. He was a thin man with parted light brown hair and yellow-orange glasses. Around his neck was a thick black scarf with gear patterns on it. "Lord Ratchet!"

"It is just a pirate ship. So the arrows did not work? Who cares? Calm down. We have more than one way to sink a ship," Ratchet spoke into his Den Den Mushi. "Initiate Pattern Two and enjoy the results."

"Understood!" Maji snapped his fingers and spoke into his own. He ran down in front of the mechanical men, jumped on a platform with a giant lever attached to it, and started to laugh at the pirate ship. "You smug assholes have no idea with whom you are dealing with!"

With that, he jumped down on the lever. In a second, the sand parted to reveal their ultimate weapon: a giant fan the size of a house. "This is our greatest creation: a pirate ship-interception contraption! We call it the Fan King! Tremble at its ferocity, you pirate scum!"

"...is that...just a giant fan?" Petrea hit herself in the face. "What the hell?!"

"...I'm torn between its stupidity and its beauty," Genevieve admitted.

"Ingenious!" Peridot commented with glee. "A propeller of that size could easily force this ship off course! Their technology might be simplistic, but it works so well in concept! I can't wait to see how it lives up to my expectations and to see how it handles the large amount of force required to utilize it without damaging the internal mechanics!"

"What expectations could you possibly have? Look at it! THAT is their ultimate weapon? How ridiculous!" Pearl laughed to herself. "My, my! This is going to be easier than I thought!"

"...you are enjoying this way too much," Zoro commented before grinning. "Still, it's nice to see you let loose a bit."

"I'm glad I have your approval!"

"Enjoy your trip!" Maji snorted on the beach as he jumped down on the lever. Slowly gears went round and round and cogs began to grind and pound as the fan blades began to spin. Though the sight was somewhat comical, there was no denying its effectiveness.

The burst of directed wind that hit the Going Merry was intense enough to send it flying backwards. Thinking quickly, Nico Robin focused her abilities onto the beach and at Maji. **"Clutch!"** With that, hands appeared on Maji and broke his back effortlessly. At the same time, she used her hands to keep everybody stabilized in place while Sanji held onto Nami with all of his might.

Though his face did not show it, it was one of the happiest moments of his life.

"If this keeps up, the ship will be destroyed!" Usopp screamed. He then directed his rage toward the shore. "What the hell, you bastard! We were promised a reward for bringing Roba back here!"

Maji, who had previously been laughing at their misfortune, stopped and blinked. "What are you idiots talking about?"

"We were promised the King of the Seas' Golden Crown!" Pearl shouted over the fan. "If you give it to us, we will gladly leave you

without further disruption! Otherwise, you will have to face the Straw Hat crew!"

The mere mention of the crown caused Maji to pause. After a brief moment, he began to laugh even harder with tears streaming down his face. "You...you mean to tell me you were lured here by that old fairy tale?!" You sure got duped! What are you all: pirates or stupid children?"

"I KNEW IT!" Nami roared angrily. "Somebody, destroy that thing so I can go give that old woman a piece of my mind!"

"Uh..." Steven pointed to the shore. "I don't think we need to! Steven says to take cover!"

The giant fan, using all of its strength, had drawn in the mechanical archers that were positioned behind it. As it blew with all of its might, it tore the robotics to shreds and launched the debris at the Going Merry like a cannon. Steven, ducking like the others, attempted to bubble up the ship as fast as he could, but could not do it in time to stop the debris from utterly destroying the main sails of the ship.

However, the ship managed to stop moving. Peering up from the ground and dropping the bubble, the Straw Hats began to survey the damage.

"Poor Merry," Connie put a hand on the sail as she used it to get back on her feet. "What did that mean fan do to you?"

"It couldn't handle its own power," Peridot grumbled. "Gah! It was such a brilliant idea considering the limited resources!"

"What does that mean?" Chopper asked.

"It means that the fan was destroyed by its own devices and we came out with minimal damage. These are positive things," Garnet observed.

"MINIMAL DAMAGE?! THE SAIL IS DESTROYED AND A LARGE PART OF THE BODY OF THE SHIP IS AS WELL!" Nami freaked out. "If Steven didn't use his bubble, we could have been killed!"

"I would have done it sooner, but you told me not to!" Steven picked himself up, breathing heavily. "I'm sorry that I hurt you, Merry!"

"Don't apologize. Your actions may have saved the ship from true damage," Robin reminded him. "That was a very good use of your abilities."

"You too!" Steven smiled. "I think you saved us from flying off of the ship and into the bubble!"

"Who cares if we flew off of the ship at this point?!" Nami banged her head on the wall. "We have no treasure, our ship is damaged, and we have no treasure!"

"You said that last part twice," Pearl pointed out.

"I KNOW WHAT I SAID!"

Slowly, the Straw Hats began to pick themselves up. It seemed like morale was now low. Everyone was either experiencing minor pain or were angry at the situation. The last person to rise was Luffy, who was not picking up on his crews' attitude.

"Hey! Why are we still sitting here? Let's go back to that island and kick that guy's ass so we can get our treasure!" Luffy stood up and shook debris off of his shoulders. "Turn the ship around, Nami!"

"Turn...the ship...around...?!" Nami's eye began to twitch with extreme anger. In one swift motion, she forced him back to the floor and got as close as she could into his face. A crazy smile adorned her face. "You want ME to turn the ship around?! ME: who warned you about coming here? ME: who told you there was no treasure?! ME: WHO TOLD YOU WE WERE BEING PLAYED LIKE A HARP FROM HELL?! WHY WOULD I TURN THIS SHIP AROUND?! LOOK AT THIS MESS YOU HAVE GOTTEN US IN!"

"What mess? We still need to find the treasure!" Luffy, despite fearing for his life, tried to put on a brave face.

"IT DOES NOT EXIST!"

"Yes, it does!" Luffy protested. "The old lady said it exists, so it has

to exist!"

"We have NO proof!" Nami grabbed Luffy by the mouth and pulled his lips down. "That guy said it doesn't exist! That explains it all right there!"

"But Nami, we can't just give up hope already!" Steven interjected. "There just has to be the treasure! I know it!"

"I don't know, Schtoo-ball," Greg put a hand on his shoulder. "Things don't seem particularly hopeful at the moment..."

"Actually, I'm inclined to agree with our captain," Robin chimed in. "I think that the treasure does exist."

"WHAT?" Nami turned sharply in her direction. "You can't be serious! I'd expect that from someone like Damian or Usopp, but you? Where is your proof?!"

"Hey!" the two men in question yelled at once. "What does that mean?!"

"Think about it, Miss Navigator. Roba only told us out of desperation for her life, but that rude gentleman told us it didn't exist after a deliberate pause. Why would Roba magically think of an old children's song to save her life? Why would he pause like that? I can read body language, and Roba certainly believed she was telling the truth and that man was clearly hiding something," Robin began to walk around the ship to survey its structure. "Either way, we are sitting ducks out here. We need to use the back sail to navigate to a secure part of the island while we confer about how to proceed from here."

"An excellent idea, Robin-chan! I shall prepare a lovely dinner for us all in your honor!" Sanji stood up theatrically and ran toward the kitchen. "Just remember: it will be made with love!"

"Sounds like my kind of meal," Garnet smirked.

"I agree. I'm famished," Connie held her stomach before looking over to Chopper, who had shifted to his humanoid form and had his eyes closed. "Hey, are you okay? What's wrong?"

"Hmm?" Chopper blinked, clearly snapping out of something. "Oh! Sorry, don't mind me. It's just that...something doesn't feel right about this."

"About what?" Connie asked.

"This island...I keep thinking that I hear a small voice," Chopper stared out to the shore. "But I don't know from where."

"A voice?" Pearl mused. "I don't hear anything..."

"Yeah," the reindeer blushed. "Forget I said anything! I must just be hungry!"

"Hmm..." Garnet folded her arms. "Perhaps...or perhaps not. Either way, it seems like it is unanimous. If we are to move any further on our pirate adventure, we are going to require a feast meant for a King of the Sea."

"Are you even going to eat it?" Damian asked.

"As long as it is made with love."

GWMAPT

After docking the ship away from the wreckage of the giant fan, the Straw Hats feasted on Sanji's dinner. Of course, Pearl did not partake in the meal, but she was very talkative about the concept of pirate treasure. Seeing Pearl get this excited over ANYTHING pirate related that did not involve sword fighting made Steven feel happy. He was worried that Pearl would never truly come around to his friends. Maybe she would see them less as pirates or humans and more as...well, friends. The youth knew that Pearl had the farthest to go when it came to human interaction (discounting Peridot, but even she seemed to be enjoying the present company as much as she could), so he truly appreciated what she was trying to do.

"That hit the spot," Greg burped, eliciting a laugh from the men. "You have a way with food, lover boy."

"That I do," Sanji couldn't help but smile as he turned to the ladies leaning on the rails of the ship. "And what about you fine ladies? Did

you enjoy your meals, my darlings?"

"Wonderful as always," Robin smiled.

"THEN I'VE DONE MY JOB!" Sanji squealed with delight. "May I get you something to drink? Nami-san? Robin-chan? Petrea-chan?"

"Nothing for me," Nami shook her head.

"I'll have some tea with lemon," Petrea requested.

"Coffee would be delightful," Robin admitted.

"SAY NO MORE!" Sanji ran straight to the kitchen to prepare drinks for the ladies, ignoring Greg raising his hand.

"Could I get some coffee too? Hey? Sanji?" Greg tried to call him. He sighed and slumped down. "He's not going to respond, is he?"

"Don't take it personally, Mr. Universe," Robin tried to comfort him. "I'm sure there will be plenty of coffee to go around."

"If you all are done worrying about drinks, may we resume our search for treasure?" Pearl joined the others on the rails, trying to look laid back as she did so. "I am sure there has to be something we all have missed!"

"You know what we all have missed? Amethyst stealing my portion of potatoes!" Usopp stamped his foot on the ground. "You thought I wouldn't notice it, but I did!"

"...that wasn't what I..." Pearl started to protest before getting cut off by her Gem companion.

"Bro, you weren't even eating it!" Amethyst pointed out. "If you are just going to leave it there, then of course I'm going to grab it!"

"No fair! I had called it before you did!" Luffy whined. "Usopp's food should have been mine!"

"USOPP'S FOOD SHOULD HAVE BEEN USOPP'S!" Usopp yelled as he began to chase Luffy and Amethyst to give them a piece of his

mind. The three began to run around in a circle with Chopper and Steven joining along for no apparent reason other than to have fun.

Sighing, Pearl did her best to ignore them. "As I was TRYING to say, I think that we can't be so quick to discount the validity of that human's song. It was the proof that Roba woman used to back up her claim."

"Agreed," Nami nodded. "Does anyone remember what the lyrics were exactly? There might be a clue or something in it..."

"Actually, I wrote it..." Robin began to reach into her chest to pull out a small piece of paper, but was drowned out by a familiar voice filling the air. The archaeologist glanced over to Greg, who had begun to sing aloud. This was not unheard of considering the musicality of the Universe family.

What was interesting was that the voice coming out of Greg's mouth was not his own. Rather, it was that of the fisherman they encountered before: ***"Swaying, swaying, swaying! The King of the Seas; the Golden Crown! Swaying, swaying, swaying! If you listen close, you'll hear the sound! White snake eyes, two moons up there, the sound of the black wind, feeling lighter than air..."***

As Greg finished recounting the melody, he noticed that all eyes (save that of the childish pirates running around in a circle, who had ignored the display entirely) were on him. The musician blushed and darted his eyes around. "Uh...what? What did I do? Why is everyone staring at me? I told you, I found it catchy and..."

"Greg, do you not realize what you have just done?!" Pearl gasped in shock. "You have the ability of vocal mimicry!"

"I have the what?" Greg raised an eyebrow.

"It means you can imitate other people's voices!" Connie grinned from ear to ear. "Oh my gosh! You just unlocked a new ability from your Devil Fruit!"

"I did?" Greg asked. "But...but how?"

"Your Devil Fruit is based on sound manipulation," Robin theorized. "Technically, sound is malleable on a wavelength level. It stands to reason that if they were tinkered with enough, it could result in the ability to change your voice."

"So...I can autotune my voice without realizing it?!" Greg stared down at his hands and proceeded to cough. "Hey! Look at me, Steven! I'm you: son of the greatest musician who ever lived!"

The pirates merely stared at him in silence, with Steven breaking away from his chasing companions to regard his father. The elder Universe groaned and buried his head into his hands. "That was just my regular voice, wasn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," Garnet told him.

"Wait, what did I miss?" Steven asked. "What's wrong, dad?"

"Ugh. This is embarrassing," Greg groaned. "I tried to change my voice into yours, Schtoo-ball. Instead, I looked like an idiot."

"You're not an idiot! You are the coolest dad I have ever had!"

"You're just saying that," Greg mumbled. "I'll never get the hang of this Devil Fruit thing. I've been messing with it for a month and I never even knew I could do that! You guys make this stuff seem so easy!"

"It's okay, Greg," Petrea tried to comfort him. "It takes time to figure out the details of your Devil Fruit abilities. What you should take away from this is that you have that power at all. Do you have any idea how useful having a person who can change their voice is?"

"It is?"

"Of course it is!" Nami nodded. "This has just given our crew a major advantage on the seas! This is wonderful AND useful! Can you repeat that song one more time?"

Greg beamed with pride, realizing that he was actually somewhat useful to the present situation. He repeated it again, the fisherman's voice and all, while Nami and the others listened intently.

"If we are to search for clues, we need to break this down to its core elements," Pearl tapped her cheek in thought. "Since I do not see a second moon in the sky here, the line about two moons is probably important."

"As is the white snake eyes," Nami began to pace. "Maybe the two are related. I think..."

Before she continued, she finally snapped and attacked her captain and the others who were running around. The four of them, Amethyst included, groaned as they tended to their minor injuries. "STOP RUNNING AROUND AND STAY ON TASK!"

"Ouch...navigator girl has got a punch!" Amethyst laughed at her own pain. "Now I know why they call you 'Scary Nami!'"

"Do they now?!" Nami gave a malicious smile. "Seriously, it is the same crap every time with you all! There is a time and a place to act like buffoons! You wanted to go on this amazing treasure hunt, so do us a favor and start helping!"

Luffy let his body fall backwards onto the side of the Going Merry so he could view the island upside down. He sighed to himself and ignored the black eye that was swelling thanks to the power of his navigator. As he half-listened to Sanji returning with Robin's and Petrea's promised beverages, the pirate captain narrowed his eyes and stared intently at the island. Despite Nami's complaint, Luffy WAS actually listening to what they were saying.

The island, despite being what Nami would call a "summer island," had a stretch of what appeared to be snow-covered mountains running down to the shore to an incredibly large rock with two protrusions. That was not what caught Luffy's eye. Rather, the image of the white peaks reflecting on the water made it seem like it was moving to and fro...as if it were a white snake.

"White snake..." Luffy muttered to himself. "White snake!"

"Hmm?" Nami glanced over to her captain. "Yes? What about it?"

"Look! It's a white snake!" Luffy pointed out to the reflected image.

"What? Where?" Nami peered out into the ocean. "I don't see anything!"

"Oh! Oh! I do!" Steven bounced up and down with excitement. "It's the reflection of the mountains! It wasn't a real snake: it was a mountain!"

The Straw Hats took a moment to follow Luffy and Steven's train of thought. One by one, they began to widen their eyes with excitement. It was sinking in that the legend of the golden crown might not be farfetched as they believed. The only one who looked bewildered this point was Peridot, who was nodding to keep up appearances. "Yes! Yes! Of course it is a white snake! How were we so blind?" She proceeded to nudge Robin indiscreetly and began to whisper. "What's a snake?"

"An armless animal," Robin whispered back. "I'll explain more later."

"...what? That is preposterous! How can it function with no arms?!"

"So if that is the snake, what about the moons?" Pearl glanced up at the shining orb in the sky. "Clearly there is something we are all missing...if the snake is not a literal animal, then the moons are probably metaphorical as well..."

"Maybe the reflection is the key to all of this," Connie suggested. "A moon in the sky can be reflected off of the water, giving us two moons!"

"That seems way too easy," Sanji commented, still holding the coffee pot in case Robin wished to refill her cup. He had yet to pick up on Greg staring at the pot, too shy to ask again for his much-needed caffeine. "We couldn't have been the only ones to pick up on the snake reflection. Two clues found in a reflection? No way. We need to think outside of the box on this one..."

"Oh! What if the moon...wasn't a moon!" Amethyst suggested. "Maybe it just LOOKS like a moon."

"So, you mean like a white mountain range that looks like a snake?" Genevieve commented dryly. "We never would have guessed."

"Hey! I don't hear YOU contributing any ideas!" the Gem complained. "You're a painter! You are supposed to be creative and junk! Why don't you open up your lazy eyes and tell us what you see?"

"Eyes?" Genevieve went silent for a moment and then scanned the shore. "That's not a bad idea...hey. You guys. Try hitting that 'snake's' eyes." She pointed to Luffy and Usopp and then to the giant rock at the end of the shore. "I bet that you can't do it in one shot."

"Please! I am the ship's sniper! This will be no..." Usopp began to boast before getting blown backwards by Luffy's eagerness.

"GUM GUM BAZOOKA!" Luffy cheered as he shot both of his fists toward the two protrusions. They struck the rocky surface at the same time, causing it to explode into millions of little pieces. However, the spherical rock did not break entirely. It appeared that the attack caused the front of the rock to collapse directly into the ocean, but done so in a rather deliberate manner. Where a full front once was, a giant hole appeared. However, it did not take the crew long to realize the rock was larger than they first thought and that the hole was actually an opening to a cave.

Needless to say, the Straw Hats were shocked and overjoyed.

"Called it," Genevieve allowed herself a rare grin.

"YAHOO! WE DID IT!" Luffy cheered excitedly. **"IT REALLY WAS A SNAKE!"**

"So the snake opened its mouth when hit in the eyes?" Greg asked. "What are the odds?"

"So did the person who hid the crown just wall up the cave with those rocks?" Damian asked. "That seems like a lot of work to hide treasure...and the logistics behind it are just staggering. This raises so many questions!"

"We shouldn't worry about that now! Don't you see what this means? We can go inside of the cave and find the treasure!" Steven

celebrated with joy. "But we have to be careful! This might be like the Cave of Wonders! If we touch anything besides the crown, we might get trapped inside forever!"

"That sounds scary!" Chopper shuddered. "Will we be okay?"

"Only if we keep our wits about us," Pearl clenched her fist excitedly. "Oh, this just made it all worth it! A secret entrance to a hidden cave! I haven't been on an adventure like this since the first time we found the Sea Spire!"

"That was a fun one," Garnet nodded. "I have a feeling this one will be better."

"Wait, where are we going on this adventure?" Usopp asked.

"That cave," Garnet pointed to the newly-discovered opening.

"Right now?"

"Right now."

"Woah, woah, woah!" Usopp put his foot down. "You aren't suggesting going into an old, scary cave in the middle of the night on an island that has robot archers and other traps?!"

The pirates stared at him with confusion. "But...but this is a treasure hunt. Why wouldn't we want to go find the treasure?" Steven asked slowly.

"But...but..." Usopp looked around and suddenly collapsed to the ground, writhing in pain. "Oh no! I have caught the deadly 'Don't-Go-Into-The-Cave Disease!' I'm a gonner unless we leave this island at once!"

"OH NO! THIS MAN NEEDS A DOCTOR! SOMEBODY FIND A DOCTOR!" Chopper ran around in a circle in fear.

"That's you," Garnet pointed out.

"OH MY GOD! YOU'RE RIGHT!" Chopper stopped where he was.

"Stop faking, Usopp! We are going to be fine!" Luffy laughed.

"THINK OF THE TRAPS THAT ARE NO DOUBT GOING TO BE INSIDE OF THERE!" Usopp spang up and grabbed Luffy by the shirt. "USE SOME COMMON SENSE!"

"But that's half of the fun! Besides, weren't those other traps awesome?!" Luffy reminded him.

"Well...yeah...but..."

"And wouldn't it be awesome to see even MORE of them?" Steven joined in eagerly.

"But...I mean, the archer robots were kind of cool..." Usopp's fear began to subside.

"And wouldn't you just be so upset if you missed out on the opportunity to see more giant machines?" Connie added.

"Giant machines?! In there?!" Peridot ran over and got to her knees. "Oh please, liar human! Just think of how incredible it would be to examine one of them up close! We may never get this chance again!"

And with that, Usopp changed his tune and ran to the side of the ship. "You've convinced me! To Mecha Island!"

"TO MECHA ISLAND!" Luffy, Connie, Steven, Chopper, and Peridot cheered in unison.

"...you guys are idiots," Nami grumbled to herself.

"They might get overexcited, but it is good to have something fun to work towards. Besides, don't you want to look for treasure?" Petrea reminded her.

"TREASURE?! THAT'S RIGHT! IT WILL BE MINE!" Nami took charge and ran to direct the Going Merry toward the opening of the cave. "TO THE GOLDEN CROWN!"

With that, the small pirate ship entered the maw of the white snake.

Unbeknownst to them, they were being spied upon from the show by a man in a black brace. It was Maji, who was shocked to see the discovery the Straw Hats had unveiled. As quickly as he could, he grabbed his Den Den Mushi and picked up the receiver. "Lord Ratchet, we have a problem!"

The Invitation from Lord Ratchet

On a dark corner of Mecha Island, a large mechanical fortress stood tall. With various beams sticking out from the side, it gave the impression of being hobbled together from a distance. Yet it was a venerable stronghold all the same and it was here that the man called Ratchet called his home.

The man adjusted his glasses as he continued to read from his book. He was standing in front of a large whiteboard full of mathematical problems. He was deep in thought as he shouted orders to the other occupant of the room. The man was larger than Ratchet (even before including his afro into the equation) and possessed a square jaw. He wore an open blue jacket and camouflage pants. "General Honki, move the moon in the sea from twenty-two degrees left to eighty-six degrees right."

"Yes, sir!" Honki saluted. He sauntered over to a small replica of the island with a small moon that was in scale with the model. Just as he prepared to adjust the moon to the exact specifications Ratchet demanded, a Den Den Mushi began to ring. "Uh...sir?"

"Eighty. Six. Degrees," Ratchet snapped, ignoring the ringing.

"Gotcha...but how many degrees left?" Honki asked.

Ratchet stared at his general and groaned. "Just...just answer the damn Den Den Mushi."

As Honki did just that, Ratchet stared at his research. It was bad enough that his mother had returned after being kidnapped by pirates, but these were idiots with enough power to actually repel his defense systems. All it did was make Ratchet angry. He was angry that he couldn't crack the true meaning of the swaying song. He was angry that he would have to rebuild all of his archers. He was angry that his mother was back home.

"This is the research lab!" Honki was replying merrily. "Who might I ask is...oh! General Maji! What can we do for you?"

"Listen!" the voice of Ratchet's other general called from the other line. "I have some seriously bad news. I've been watching those pirates from earlier, and I think they are starting to catch on to the song's riddle! They've definitely figured out the part about the white snake and are just sitting there! I mean, I'll continue to watch them, but what should we do?!"

Honki gave a look of confusion to Ratchet, who thought for a moment. Finally, he shrugged. "Just let them be for now. The white snake was simple enough to figure out...it is the next part that is tricky. If I can't figure it out, they certainly won't. Still, if they dock their ship on the shore, use Pattern Three or Four to initiate countermeasures. It should suffice against their abilities."

"Roger that!" Maji saluted from the shore and prepared to hang up the Den Den Mushi before stopping. "Wait! Something is happening, sir! I think one of the pirates ate a Devil Fruit! He just stretched his arms out and...WHAT THE HELL?!"

"What?!" Ratchet started to get annoyed as he grabbed the receiver of the Den Den Mushi. "What happened?!"

"The pirate...the pirate..." Maji stammered.

"Spit it out already!" Ratchet yelled.

"The pirate solved the riddle and revealed some kind of cave! It was the giant snake rock!" Maji finally managed to speak.

"WHAT?!" Ratchet freaked out. The man got so angry that his glasses started to fog up. He began to pace back and forth in simultaneous anger and excitement. "This changes things. We need information about the cave and..."

"Uh..." Honki pointed at the glasses. Without missing a beat, Ratchet hit a small button on the sides of his glasses and revealed two small wipers that cleaned the condensation off of the lenses.

"They obviously just got lucky and found it by accident. That has to be it. We couldn't see it from here...still, they might be of use to us..." Ratchet stopped pacing and started to smirk. "Get General Maji

back on the line. They are just a bunch of stupid, dirty pirates. We will, quite simply, make them an offer they can't refuse!"

"Yes, sir!"

As the two began to plot their plans to coheres the Straw Hats to do Ratchet's bidding, a third figure spied on them from the shadows. It was Roba, who looked so dejected as she watched her son.

"...Ratchet...what happened to my boy?"

GWMAPT

"When you hoist up your flag, you don't want to brag, but you'll know that you'll find your way!" Steven sang merrily to a beat provided by his father. He motioned over to Connie, who took a bow.

"And if we press on right through, I think I'll know what we'll do: we are gonna find treasure today!" Connie joined him, following Steven's lead and passing the pantomime microphone over to Luffy.

"Finding treasure, is no half-measure! We must prepare, so we'll go where...we can find treasure! Yes, where we can find treasure!" Luffy laughed and sang to his own beat, causing Greg to try to adjust while maintaining consistency.

"If we take this quest, we'll be our best, but just keep yourself aware," Nami pointed out, grabbing the pretend microphone and singing with them. *"We do not know, what things will show, their faces right in there."*

"To stay on guard, is not that hard, we will take it without stride! Come on, let's go and stay with the flow! Let the Merry be your guide!" Pearl joined in on their celebration game and then pointed to Zoro.

Their eyes turned to the swordsman, who shrugged and ignored them. He went back to his sake and took a swig. "Um...Zoro?" Steven whispered. "It's your turn."

"I told you when you had this idea that I wasn't going to sing. What makes you think I would change my mind from five minutes ago?" Zoro asked.

"Oh come now, Zoro! Singing is fun and you know it!" Pearl elbowed him. "Just go with the flow and enjoy it! Nobody here will judge you!"

Sanji and Damian started to laugh to themselves, causing Garnet to hit both of them on the back of their heads. "You have no room to talk, bomb-man."

"My singing is fantastic, rock-woman," Damian retorted.

"...no," Zoro frowned.

"As your captain, I order you to sing!" Luffy pointed at him.

"...no..."

"Aw, come on! I gave you an order! Just do it!" Luffy looked dejected.

Before Zoro could respond, a cry was heard from the side of the ship. Sure enough, the Straw Hats were surprised to see a small boat floating toward them. "New boat!" Steven cried.

"It's that buffoon from the shore," Pearl bit her lip. "He had better not ruin this mission...err...adventure."

"Maybe he's come to parlay?" Connie suggested.

"More like he's come to ass kicked," Zoro grinned. "This is more like it!"

"You're not getting out of this, Zoro!" Luffy stamped his foot angrily. "You'll sing sooner than later!"

"Hello, pirate people!" General Maji waved from his small boat. "I...uh...trust you are all doing well?"

"Cut the shit and tell us what you want," Sanji snapped. "Your little stunt almost killed these lovely ladies. If you think that there is anything you can say or do that will cause me to forget that, you have another thing coming to you..."

GWMAPT

"THIS IS THE GREATEST THING I HAVE EVER SEEN!" Sanji shouted with joy.

At the request of Maji, the Straw Hats were invited back to Ratchet's stronghold for a party to celebrate the discovery of the hidden entrance. The man even prepared tuxedos for the men and beautiful dresses for the ladies to wear, much to Sanji's delight. The Gems, for their part, declined to wear the clothes and merely changed their appearance to match the occasion. The only one who did not was Peridot, who claimed that she did not feel comfortable resembling anything but her current appearance. While the far too trusting and innocent members of the crew were more than happy to take part in the celebration without asking any questions, others were more than willing to make their uneasiness known. The fact that their host was nowhere to be found only added to it.

"...this...this doesn't raise ANYONE'S suspicions at all?" Pearl asked, gazing around.

"What's the matter, Pearl? I thought you were trying to 'go with the flow' on this one?" Amethyst jabbed her sides in jest.

Pearl's cheeks immediately flared blue. "I am! I just...there is a difference between adventuring into the unknown and making reckless decisions like attending a party set up for us by the men who tried to kill us!"

"That's literally the exact same thing," Amethyst countered. "Unless this guy is stronger than that ice dude, I think we've got this."

"I suppose..." Pearl looked around uneasily and forced herself to sigh. "I just have a bad feeling about all of this. I mean, that's not even counting how uncomfortable I feel about Steven seeing the female humans dressed so..."

"I believe the word you are looking for is 'revealing,'" Nami joined them, glancing down at her own dress. "I mean, who the hell does this for a group of people that they don't even know? The last time this happened, Baroque Works tried to kill us in our sleep. Everything seems way too weird for my liking. I don't trust it."

"It does seem strange," Pearl agreed. "The few human celebrations I visited back in our dimension were far more modest and humble."

"Maybe he's just a pervert?" Amethyst suggested.

"Amethyst! Don't judge!" Pearl scolded her.

At the same time, Chopper was staring around the room himself with Genevieve. Both were in awe by the sight. "This is one interesting looking castle. Look at the curved railings! This is something out of an abstract painting!" Genevieve allowed herself to gush.

"It reminds me of Drum Castle! Boy, I wonder what Doctorine is up to?" Chopper pondered to himself. He took a drink from his cup and wiped his lips. "I'm gonna go get another drink. Do you want one?"

"I'm still working on this one. You go on. I'm trying to memorize every detail of this place," Genevieve said as she continued to wander around.

The reindeer shrugged and noticed two people in the corner. One was an elderly man in a suit and the other was a younger woman in a maid's outfit. She was carrying a few different drinks on a tray, so Chopper walked over and presented his cup. "Seconds please!"

What Chopper was not expecting was the sound of gears and grinding cogs coming from the woman as she jerkily acknowledged him. She slowly moved to him and bent down to his level, freaking the reindeer out. He quickly replaced his drink and found himself unable to look away. After he placed his empty cup down, the head of the young woman immediately fell off of her neck, revealing mechanical pieces.

This did not fly well with Chopper, who began to scream and run around in circles. "AHHHHHHH! SHE HAS BEEN BEHEADED! I NEED A DOCTOR! WHERE CAN I FIND A DOCTO...oh, that's me," Chopper collected himself and looked back at the dismembered mechanical head. "AHHHHH! WHAT DO I DO?!"

"I'm terribly sorry about that," the elderly man commented, bending down to pick up the head. "These mechanical marionettes still have

a few bugs in them. I'm sure they will be fixed in no time."

"A TALKING ROBOT?!" Chopper gasped.

"Robots?! Where?!" Peridot ran over excitedly from the other side of the room. Chopper pointed at the head, which caused Peridot to squeal with delight. "AN AUTOMATON! Oh, look at the circuitry! Do you care if I dissect this, human?"

"I'm sure the master would mind," he replied.

"Master?" Peridot repeated. "What master? I see no other humans around here..."

"He likes to make unnecessarily large entrances," he sighed. Just as he uttered those words, the ground began to shake. "That would be him now."

On cue, a panel in the wall opened up and revealed three little animatronic figures each playing an instrument. The lights then turned off and revealed a disco ball hanging from the ceiling. The room began to illuminate from the ball, giving off a psychedelic ambiance. "Groovy," Greg looked around in awe. "This brings me back to my childhood."

"Word," Garnet nodded.

"This. Is. Awesome!" Luffy clapped his hands together in delight.

Smoke began to pour into the room as a giant door opened up. Slowly moving forward was a giant mechanical device. It vaguely looked like a giant, purple turtle with a large windup key sticking out from the back. In the middle was a large throne that seated the gentleman that controlled the glider machine from earlier as well as a larger man. He adjusted his glasses and waved to the pirates. "Good evening, my guests! Thank you all for coming!"

Before he knew it, the man found Luffy, Chopper, Usopp, Connie, Steven, and Peridot in his face. All of them had stars in their eyes. "THIS. IS. SO. COOL!"

The larger man, without missing a beat, moved in front of the

bespectacled man and hit the pirates away. "I don't care if you are guests! Learn some respect!"

The second they hit the floor, the man with the glasses held up his hands and admonished the other man. "Now General Honki, that was a bit too much! Please excuse my loyal follower! He tends to be a bit overprotective."

"Sorry," Honki bowed his head.

"What is this...thing?" Peridot asked, quickly getting up to examine the machine. "It is so clunky, yet it seems to operate without any actual controls beyond the key! Color me impressed, human!"

"Oh this? This is my Mr. Tortoise #5 mecha! Yes, it is quite impressive. I assume you all know that my name is Ratchet, correct? I am the master of this island!"

"A caster?" Luffy asked, mishearing him. "So you are a fisherman?"

"...where were you when they handed out the brains?" Nami slapped her face in embarrassment. "He said 'master!'"

"Yeah! Lord Ratchet is the greatest person on this island," the man known as Maji spoke up. "He not only is our leader but is a genius inventor! Nobody knows robots like him!"

"Nyehehehehe!" Peridot laughed. "That's rich!"

"And what does that mean?" Maji barked at her.

"Nothing! Nothing! Please continue," Peridot could not stop laughing to herself. "You see, I know quite a bit about robotics myself, so I am quite eager to see more of your inventions!"

"Really?" Ratchet smiled. "Well, this just got interesting. I'll be glad to discuss more about my work after the party and..."

"Oh, just cut to the chase already!" Nami interjected. "Why did you invite us here after what happened earlier? Why the sudden change in heart?"

Ratchet stared at her and sighed. "Very well. I suppose we will dispense with the pleasantries. First, please accept my apologies for earlier. I thought you had kidnapped my mother, so I panicked. Clearly that was not the case. This party was my way of showing thanks...as were the formal clothing. Do you like them?"

"YES!" Sanji stated without hesitation.

"They were a bit much," Nami frowned and looked at her red dress. "Did they need to reveal so much cleavage?"

"YES!" Sanji repeated, again without hesitation.

"I...I honestly never thought about it," Ratchet admitted, his face beet-red. "I apologize if I offended you."

"I don't know...I kind of like mine," Petrea did a twirl to show off her green gown. "It makes me feel important."

"What about you four? Didn't you want to wear yours?" Ratchet asked the Gems.

"Not our style," Garnet folded her arms.

"Fair enough. Now then, let's get down to business. Tell me, how far along are you with the riddle?"

"Bold and direct...I'm starting to like your style," Nami smirked. "Truthfully, we haven't a damn clue."

Ratchet opened his mouth to speak, but couldn't find his words.

"But...but you just found the hidden cave! I didn't even know about the hidden cave! Are you telling me it was just dumb luck?!"

"Maybe it was luck, maybe it wasn't. Either way, we were about to give up and go home. There was no point in continuing," Nami sighed theatrically. "Still, thank you for the food and the clothes. I guess we will be on our way. After all...if there isn't a treasure here like your friend told us, then what's the point of staying?"

"You...you are leaving?!" Ratchet nearly fell off of the mechanical device in worry. "You can't!"

"We are?" Steven asked.

"I think I know what Nami is doing. Clever girl," Damian nodded to himself.

"This might sound stupid, but what is she doing?"

"Simple, Steven. She is trying to read this guy to see what HE knows. It's an old trick," the bomb-man explained as he took a swig of his grog. "This ain't half bad."

"Why shouldn't we leave?" Nami asked.

"Because my generals told you there was no treasure to get you to leave! It's true! There is a treasure!" Ratchet waved his hands around. "Our people have spoken of it for hundreds of years! We've just had no luck finding it on our own!"

"That was because you didn't have the combined might of our pirate crew!" Pearl announced. "I have no doubt, now that we have confirmation of its existence, that we will find the treasure in no time! We are composed of some of the greatest individuals on the..."

"THIS IS ADORABLE!" Steven shouted, cutting off Pearl in the process. "Look at this guys! It is a small robot serving tea!"

"Ooh!" the Straw Hats, save Nami and Pearl, said in awe. Sure enough, there was a tiny robotic figure holding a tea cup serving tea to Steven.

"Is there another that has lemons?" Petrea asked.

"This is making me miss my Robonoids," Peridot quickly moved to where Steven was to get a better look.

"CAN WE FOCUS ON THE MATTER AT HAND?!" Nami and Pearl shouted together.

"Yikes," Greg jumped back in fear. "Those two are surprisingly effective when they work together."

"Back to what we were saying," Pearl rubbed her forehead in

frustration. "I believe our business is concluded here. It was a lovely event, but we really must continue on our mission. Do you agree, Nami?"

"I do, Pearl," the navigator smirked. "If that is all..."

"You misunderstand me!" Ratchet hastily replied. "I don't want you to go! I want to join up with you!"

"What?"

"It's true! We've been trying for ages to figure out this riddle and here you come and find some hidden cave after a few hours! I've realized what I needed was a fresh set of eyes!"

"I gotcha covered!" Amethyst shapeshifted her hands into her eyeballs, causing Ratchet and his men to recoil in horror.

"WHAT THE HELL?!" Honki screamed.

"PUT THEM BACK! PUT THEM BACK!" Maji cried.

"That's enough, Amethyst. You are scaring them," Garnet pointed out.

"Okay..." Amethyst did as she was asked.

"Putting...THAT aside," Ratchet coughed as he tried to play off his own fear. "I believe that it would be mutually beneficial to all of us if we worked together. We would split the treasure together and finally unlock the oldest mystery of this island! So, what do you say?"

"As long as you know who you are dealing with, I see no problem with that. See the dumbass over there?" Nami pointed to Luffy, who was trying to chase around the little servant robots. "He's our captain: 'Straw Hat' Luffy."

"THAT'S your captain?!" Ratchet asked in shock. "But he's so...so..."

"She failed to mention that he has a bounty of 100,000,000 Berries!" Pearl laughed before stopping. "That's what your currency is, right?"

"That it is, Pearl," Nami nodded.

"100,000,000 Berries?!" the three cried out in unison.

"As you can see, we are not a group to be taken lightly. If you even dare think to betray us, you are going to have to answer to him," Nami folded her arms. "Do you understand what you would be signing up for? Let me put it this way: if we risk our lives for treasure that you all can't seem to agree exists or not and you either try to double cross us or lie to us, then you all are in a world of hurt."

Before he could respond, the door slammed open and revealed a familiar face: Roba. She started to strut towards them as fast as she could. "That's enough, Ratchet! Don't you dare get these nice pirates involved in your affairs!"

Without missing a beat, Ratchet pressed a small button on his chair. This caused the ground beneath his mother to open up as she was talking. The Straw Hats looked on in shock as Roba vanished to places unknown. "What did you just do?!" Pearl gasped.

"You...but Roba was so nice!" Steven added, tears starting to form. "She was your mother...and you just killed her! How could you do that?!"

"Woah! Woah! Did I say I killed her?" Ratchet defended himself. "I wouldn't kill my own mother! What kind of a heartless monster do you take me for?!"

"We have absolutely no frame of reference for the kind of person you are. You could be a bloodthirsty killer for all we know," Robin pointed out.

"I...I suppose you are right," Ratchet frowned. "Still...want to team up?"

"You must be joking!" Pearl gave him a dirty look.

Just then, a figure descended from the ceiling: Roba, clutching a long pole that protruded from above. "Now Ratchet, think about what..."

"GAH! WE SAW HIM KILL YOU!" Pearl screamed, caught off-guard.

"No, I'm alive," Roba corrected her.

Thinking quickly, Ratchet pulled out a remote and pressed a button. Instantly, the pole started to spin away, causing Roba to be kicked out of the room. "Ugh, it's so hard keeping this place in line," Ratchet groaned.

"You don't get along with your mom, huh?" Luffy asked.

"What? No, this is just how we show affection for each other here!" Ratchet hastily explained.

"Really? Is that normally how moms show love when they are older?" Steven asked.

Most of the Straw Hats opened their mouth to argue against it, but then closed them in unison upon realizing that practically all of them have not seen their mother since they were children. "I sure as hell wouldn't show my mother any affection regardless of how old I was..." Damian grumbled to himself.

"No, Steven," Connie shook her head, realizing that nobody else was planning on giving the boy a straight answer. "That is not normal."

"Enough about that! Do we have a deal, my friends? Are we ready to embark upon a glorious adventure together?" Ratchet asked with a smile on his face.

"Of course we do, Skinny-Glasses!" Luffy grasped his hand and shook on it.

"LUFFY! YOU DON'T JUST MAKE DEALS LIKE THAT WITHOUT CONSULTING US!" Nami screamed.

"Why? I'm the captain, aren't I?"

GWMAPT

After a nice night's rest, the combined group gathered together by

the Going Merry to begin their quest anew. Docked beside the ship was a smaller craft designed by Ratchet. It looked normal enough for a small ship, but contained a giant fan sticking out from the back to propel them forward. Of course, it was this device that Amethyst, Luffy, Usopp, and Chopper were playing around with.

After being scolded by Nami, the group set their sights into the newly-discovered cave. It was dark and damp inside, but something was really bothering Chopper. The small reindeer kept looking around the cavern, searching for something that wasn't there. "Yo, reindeer dude! What are you doing?" Amethyst asked.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing! Nothing at all. I just keep hearing something...but I can't figure out what I am hearing," the reindeer frowned.

"Oh! Maybe it's the black wind from the song!" Connie suggested.

"Perhaps...but then we still need to figure out the part about feeling lighter than air," Robin tapped her finger to the side of her face. "Any ideas?"

"None whatsoever," Ratchet shook his head. "This makes no sense to me."

"Say," Genevieve pointed in front of them. "We should really be careful."

"Why?" Luffy asked.

"Because there are a bunch of shipwrecked ships coming directly at us," the painter said in a monotone voice. "Plus it looks like we are going to crash into a wall down there."

"Oh, is that all? Well...WAIT, WHAT?!" the Straw Hats cried out in unison. Peering down the body of water, it was true that several destroyed ships were floating about. However, the truly concerning part was the aforementioned wall. From the distance, it appeared to be in one piece. Upon further inspection, there was an incredibly small opening that led to another part of the cavern.

"We can't fit in that!" Greg started to panic. "We should just turn

around before we are forced to abandon ship...which is going to be a major problem for some of us!"

"I agree with Greg!" Usopp nodded, crying all the way.

"Let me handle this," Garnet stood up and cracked her knuckles as they turned into her gauntlets. "Since I'm here in this world, I might as well join the fun."

"What do you mean by that?" Steven asked curiously while trying not to panic.

"If Pearl is going to do it now, I will too. **Rocket Power Gauntlet Punch!**" Garnet shouted as she shot her gauntlets off of her arms and into the oncoming wall. The power was enough increase the bottom of the opening enough for the small ship to pass through with ease, but it was not strong enough to reach the other side. Thankfully, the Gem continued to repeat the action until their path was completely widened enough to reach their destination all the way through.

"...what...the...hell...was...that?!" Ratchet asked in simultaneous fear and awe.

"Magic," Garnet adjusted her shades with her newly reformed hands.

"Why the hell do you not use that all of the time?" Damian asked.

"I don't like to overdo it."

"Wait, I thought you needed to keep your attacks with a theme," Pearl scratched her head.

"Not everything has to be alliterative, Pearl," Garnet explained. "It just has to sound cool."

"If we could all divert our attention away from Garnet and look forward, you'll see that WE ARE ABOUT TO FALL OFF OF A WATERFALL!" Usopp continued to panic.

"THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING! IS THIS THE END FOR THE

LOVABLE PERIDOT?!" Peridot wailed as they fell off the side of the waterfall.

"Not if we could help it!" Pearl announced. "Gems, I think we should..."

"Allow me, my beautiful Pearl! Let Sanji save the day!" Sanji blew her a kiss and threw Luffy up in the air, much to his shock. "Luffy, blow yourself up into a balloon!"

"Got it! **Gum-Gum Balloon!**" Luffy began to breathe in all the air he could, causing his stomach to expand outward. The action caused him to rise up in the air, floating away from the boat. Sanji, grabbing a life preserver, jumped up and kicked his captain down into the water. The timing was so precise that the ship bounced right off of Luffy's stomach.

Deflating right there, Luffy began to stretch his arm out to grab Zoro's outstretched hand. Just as he grabbed on, Sanji managed to catch Luffy before he hit the water. Using the life preserver as a surfboard, Sanji glided along the water until the boat and the two riders crashed onto the cavernous shore.

"It seems that...that we ended up being lighter after all," Robin pointed to the battered ship. "The ship took a lot of damage. It seems we are on the right path."

"Ugh, not so loud!" Peridot grabbed her head and winced. "I feel like my gem was just shattered."

"THAT. WAS. AMAZING!" Steven cheered. "You were all like..." The boy inflated his cheeks. "And Sanji was all suave as he surfed...and we were all like 'Ahhhh!' This is turning into such a great adventure!"

"Ugh...that can be argued..." Peridot moaned. "That was way too much for me!"

"Agreed!" Greg nodded. "You guys are going to give me a heart attack if this kind of stuff keeps happening!"

"That was some quick thinking," Garnet patted Sanji on the back. "Nice work."

"It was nothing," Sanji smirked. He then ran over to Pearl and flashed her a smile. "How'd I do, Pearl? Did you see how brave I was for you?"

"If by brave you mean reckless, then yes," Pearl inched away. "But I think you both did a wonderful job regardless. I suppose we didn't need to fuse after all..."

"WHAT?!" Steven's face fell. "You guys were going to fuse?!"

"That was going to be my suggestion, yes," Pearl nodded.

"Noooooooooooo!" Steven knelt down on the ground and howled out in pain. "That would have been even more amazing!"

"Not everything needs to be solved by fusion," Garnet pointed out.

"Says the Fusion who literally solved our problem a moment ago," Usopp mumbled under his breath.

"It's okay, Steven," Amethyst helped him up. "We've probably got a million more chances to fuse and be awesome on this adventure!"

"I hope so..."

"Ahem!" Ratchet coughed, causing everyone to acknowledge him. "It appears that we can only move forward since the ship is now seriously damaged. I suggest that we split up to see what we all can find. There are several paths in this cave and any one of them can lead to the treasure."

"Splitting up in a dreary place like this? Jeez, what are we: Mystery Incorporated?" Greg asked.

"I have no idea what that means," Ratchet frowned.

As Greg tried to explain just what Mystery Incorporated was, Luffy began to wander off by himself. Suddenly, he stopped and sprinted toward something in the distance. "GUYS, I JUST FOUND SOMETHING REALLY AWESOME!"

"Awesome?!" Steven, Connie, Usopp, Amethyst, and Chopper

repeated.

"Treasure? Treasure?! Treasure! Treasure!" Nami started to run toward her captain.

Pearl clapped her hands. "Could this be another clue in the right direction? Oh, what fun!"

"Jinkies!" Greg laughed to himself. He ran after his son and his friends only to find that he was trailing behind. Watching everybody run on ahead, Greg could not help but pant. This was proving a bit too much for him to keep up with. Still, he could not deny how much fun he was having doing so. "Jeez, I need to get in shape if I'm gonna be doing this pirate thing for much longer..."

After a few minutes longer than the others, Greg saw a magnificent sight: a pool of water surrounded by several animal statues and pillars. Luffy and Steven were busy examining the statues while Robin was busy looking at the pillars. The rest were taking in the sights and trying to make sense of it.

"Woah! What have we here?" Greg called and asked.

"We have absolutely no idea," Ratchet admitted. "This is incredibly impressive."

"I had no idea that this even existed," Honki continued to gaze on in wonder.

"Maybe a gorgon lives here and these are its prey!" Connie suggested. "That would so scary that it would come back around to be amazing!"

"What's a gorgon?" Luffy asked.

"A trio of mythological female monsters that turn their victims into stone just by looking at them," Connie explained.

"That sounds scary!" Luffy shuddered.

"Don't pay her any attention," Pearl shook her head. "I am sure that gorgons do not exist in this world. They didn't exist on our Earth and

I doubt they do here."

"Oh! So these are just really cool statues?"

"I would assume so..."

"YAY! STATUES!" Luffy ran back to them and began exploring every single inch of the cave.

"You...you have a very interesting captain," Ratchet forced a smile. "He is rather easily excitable."

"Nothing wrong with that," Garnet countered.

"Hey! Pirate people! I found something odd etched into the side of this support beam!" Peridot called over to them. "Could this be of any use?"

Running over to the green Gem, the group crowded around the pillar in question. There were several small drawings carved into the beam's structure that appeared to make no sense to an untrained eye. Thankfully, Nico Robin was not such a person. "Miss Peridot, I believe this is very useful!"

"It is? Horrory! Praise me!"

"Asking us to praise you every single time you do something right just makes us not want to do it," Genevieve told her.

"But...but..." Peridot stammered.

"It's the truth."

"What does it say?" Ratchet asked. "That doesn't appear to be any language that I have ever seen before."

"It's hieroglyphics...and it seems to be another verse of our 'swaying song,'" Robin concluded. "How very interesting. This might be the next clue that we need to find our prize."

"What are you waiting for?! Read it!" Maji clapped his hands eagerly.

"Hmm...*'a blue jug of water, when you drink an abyss, the lightning in the green forest, does not miss,'*" Robin concluded. "Any thoughts?"

"Oh! What about that water there?" Amethyst pointed to the lake.
"I'm gonna drink it up!"

"You will do no such thing!" Pearl tried to stop her, but the Gem had already started to run. "Amethyst, think before you act! There might be another meaning to the song! There is no way that it is that literal!"

"She has the right idea. Think about it," Ratchet explained. "If all of us attempt to drink it together, we could very easily drain the lake! I bet the song was expecting only one person to be here!"

"That is the stupidest thing I have ever heard," Petrea slapped her head. "You are an idiot."

"An id-id-idiot?!" Ratchet nearly fell back in shock.

"What? No way! That's a genius idea, Skinny-Glasses!" Luffy smiled with joy.

"And that is why you are the captain of your ship!" Ratchet blushed.
"You clearly are a great judge of character!"

"Let's drink it up!" Luffy cheered as he ran to the water and joined Amethyst in drinking the lake up until they were full. Their teammates watched on as they tried their best and failed to make a dent in the water. Finally, they gave up and panted on the ground by the lake.

"You two are going to drown if you don't start thinking properly!" Nami scolded them. "Think before you act!"

"Ugh..." Luffy groaned. "Not so loud...it hurts...it hurts!"

"That's what you get for being a dumbass!"

"Man, I wish Lapis were here," Steven sighed and leaned up against a bird statue. "I bet she would fly to the top of this bird and just will

the water away."

"Bird?" Robin repeated as she stared up at the statue. Upon further inspection, the bird was actually an ibis: a long beaked bird that typically lived near wetlands. "This statue is blue...and it is an ibis..."

"Maybe 'abyss' actually means 'ibis?'" Sanji shrugged. "It is the same sort of shit that the other part of the riddle pulled. This is somebody's shitty idea of a joke!"

"No...no, it can't be...could it?" Nami sank to the floor. "But...but what the hell are we supposed to do with a giant bird statue?"

"I've got it!" Greg snapped his fingers. "You guys ever see those little novelty bird things that drink up water? Maybe we have to knock the bird into the water so it 'drinks up' the lake?"

The others merely stared at him as they thought about what he suggested. Finally, it was Garnet that shrugged and walked to the base of the bird. "Eh, we've got no other leads. We might as well try this." With a single punch, the Gem took out the bird's structural support and watched it fall into the middle of the lake. Almost instantly, the water began to get sucked away in a whirlpool.

"You've got to be kidding me. I was right?!" Greg's jaw fell to the floor. "Get out!"

"This is great! The bird probably cracked a hole into the floor, causing the water to return to an underground catacomb..." Ratchet theorized, looking eagerly at the disappearing lake. "I bet that the forest that was mentioned will be right at the bottom of the lake!"

"A forest...at the bottom of a lake?" Damian raised an eyebrow. "That makes no damn sense."

"It will be there! I just know it!" Ratchet gazed on eagerly. Finally, the water completely drained away and revealed...nothing. It was merely a stone bottom with a single opening coming from the side. The only other thing of note was what appeared to be a rusty harpoon wedged into the ground.

"Wow. That is some forest," Genevieve commented dryly.

"SHUT UP!" Ratchet scolded. "AT LEAST I'M TRYING!"

"And failing," Genevieve retorted.

The crew and Honki tried to calm down the painter and the inventor. Unbeknownst to all of them, General Maji took the opportunity to slink away from the group. The man headed back towards the ship, silent all the way. Finally, it was Robin who broke the tension. "Look down there. That opening is probably our best bet in getting any answers. If you all don't mind, I would like to examine it."

"I would too!" Chopper and Peridot said at the same time, causing both of them to give each other a funny look.

"I'LL COME TOO, ROBIN-CHAN!" Sanji volunteered. "I'LL PROTECT YOU!"

"While you all go check that out, I'd like to examine this harpoon," Pearl jumped down and started to pull it. "There is something about it that doesn't make sense to me..."

"We'll all stay here! You guys go have fun!" Luffy joined Pearl at the harpoon. "We are gonna figure this thing out together!"

"I am sure we will," Pearl smiled.

"Mr. Universe, would you like to accompany us?" Robin asked. "I am sure that if we require assistance, your powers might come in handy to alert the others of our whereabouts."

"Really? You think that's a good idea?" Greg scratched his head.

"Indeed, I do," Robin smiled. "Are there any objections?"

"Go have fun, dad!" Steven gave him a thumbs up. "We've got this here!"

"If you say so, kiddo," Greg sighed and adjusted his shirt. "Alright guys, let's do this!"

GWMAPT

As the group proceeded down the dark path, Sanji lit the way with his cigarette and his matches. Peridot was busy examining every nook and cranny of the pathway, searching for any clue that could be of use. Chopper, for his part, was oddly focused on trying to move forward. He seemed like he was listening for something in the ever-growing wind. To try to ease the tension, Greg started to whistle a song to himself.

"That is a very lovely tune, Greg," Robin commented as they moved toward the end of the tunnel, which was not in sight. "What is it?"

"Oh that? It's a song Rose wrote for me long ago," Greg blushed. "I don't know why I was whistling it...I guess after all the excitement from the past few days, I just really miss her."

"There is nothing wrong with that. I'd love to hear it in full some time," Robin commented.

"Really? Maybe when all of this is sorted out..." Greg began as they exited the tunnel. He looked down and saw that his shoes were now covered in white powder. "What the hay is this?"

"It appears to be calcium...and look over there," Robin pointed out in front of them. Outside of the tunnel, green grass that led up to a great mountain was covered in the aforementioned white powder, but there was another oddity on the ground. Embedded into the surface of the ground appeared to be old shells and, amazingly, barnacles. "These are fossilized barnacles...but that doesn't make any sense. They grow in water, not on the land..."

"Organic life is so confusing," Peridot picked up a piece of barnacle and examined it. "This thing was once alive?"

"It was at one point. Now it is just leftover remains to let us know that they were here...it is a clue all the same," Robin continued to look around.

"Oy, look at the mountain. There appears to be some kind of rocky building up there, Robin-chan," Sanji pointed to a spherical shape not that far ahead. "Shall we go check it out?"

Moving upwards toward the shape, it became clear that it was indeed a building. However, it seemed to be older than any building that most of the group had seen. Peridot began to look over the structure and bit her lip. "This structure is easily over a thousand years old...how can it still be in this condition after all of these years?"

"You can tell that just by looking at it?" Sanji took a drag of cigarette. "Impressive."

Peridot opened her mouth to demand praise, but stopped herself. She responded instead with a simple nod.

"But what is this place?" Chopper asked. "And what is this noise I keep hearing?"

"I can't give you any answers about the noise, but this appears to be a shrine of some kind..." Robin entered the building. "Shall we enter inside?"

"Lead the way," Greg gulped nervously. "We've come this far, haven't we?"

Inside of the shrine, the quintet found themselves unable to speak. The ceiling was covered in various jewels and, with the small bit of light that entered the single room refracting off of them, it looked like they were under a star-studded night sky. In the center of the room was a magnificent fountain with several layers. "Woah. This is right up my alley," Greg whispered.

"Humans made this? This is incredible," Peridot marveled. "I need to know what its purpose is!"

"As do I," Robin ran quickly toward the fountain. "I think this might give us the answer we need!"

She examined a symbol at the base of the fountain and squinted. "This...this...it can't be..."

"What? What can't be? What is it?!" Greg asked.

Suddenly, the island began to shake. Sanji, Peridot, and Greg

struggled to keep balance. "The hell is this?!"

"WE DEFILED THE ANCIENT TEMPLE! WE NEED TO LEAVE, NOW!" Greg screamed and ran around in panic before falling to the ground.

"I AGREE, FATHER-HUMAN!" Peridot tried to grab onto Sanji's leg. "GET ME OUT OF HERE!"

"You idiots are right. It is too dangerous in here. Come on, Robin-chan. Let's get to a safer place!" Sanji implored her to move, but she continued to stare intently at the fountain. The chef whipped around and saw that Chopper was not moving either. "What is going on with you two?! Snap out of it!"

Without warning, Chopper immediately ran outside of the shrine. Just assuming that he finally got the message, Sanji ran over to Robin. "Come on! We need to..."

"This is no earthquake...and I don't think this was started by us specifically. I think our crew figured out the rest of the song..." Robin frowned. She quickly climbed the fountain and looked at the topmost layer. Curious, Sanji stared at it as well.

"What do you mean?! If this isn't an earthquake, then what is it? And what the hell are you looking at?"

"If I am interpreting thing correctly, then the island is revealing its true form..." Robin pointed to the fountain. "This."

"...what is this? I don't understand..." Sanji scratched his head. "Are you saying that this..."

"What are you humans doing?! Why aren't we following the animal doctor?!" Peridot yelled up to them. "What is going on?!"

"That is exactly what I am saying, Mr. Cook," Robin took a deep breath. "This island...we've all awakened something incredible!"

"What? What did we awaken?" Peridot asked. "If it means we can get out of here, show me what you are looking at!"

The Gem and the musician joined the duo on top of the fountain to get a better understanding of what was going on. Instead, they found themselves more confused than before. Finally, it was Greg who found his voice. "Is that...a giant turtle?"

The Castle on the Turtle's Back

"He who pulls this harpoon, if he be worthy, will gain the power of Captain Ahab!" Connie exclaimed as she tried to pull the harpoon from the stone floor.

After the group split into two, Pearl had started to examine the mysterious weapon that had been left behind after the water flowed away. Unfortunately, she could not figure out its intended purpose except for one thing: the harpoon was actually a structurally integral part of the cave. Despite having bruises that could pull it out on a second, Pearl declared it too dangerous to attempt.

That did not stop the kids from having fun.

"You can do it, Connie! Put your back into it!" Luffy cheered on.

Giving it one last futile tug, Connie stepped back and started to blow on her hands. "That's definitely good and stuck. I better stop now before I get calluses on my palms!"

"Come on! Let me try! I'll get it out in no time!" Petrea pouted.

"I already told you why that would be a terrible idea!" Pearl turned to her. "Do you want this cave to come crumbling down on us?"

"Of course not! I just...I feel like I've barely contributed anything to this so far," Petrea glanced over at Steven trying to convince Genevieve to pull it herself. "I felt like I was doing so much with myself in Beach City. My chocolate was selling and I was doing what I loved. But here, with powerhouses like these guys? I feel like I'm barely a footnote."

"Girl, you've got to stop with the negativity!" Amethyst slapped her in the back. "What chance have we had to really do anything so far? This is some weird scavenger hunt, not a fight! Just keep doing what you do best: being awesome!"

"Besides, you did what I couldn't do and won that race against that vulgar human with the stick," Pearl reminded her. "That was a most-

impressive feat."

"I suppose," Petrea blushed. "But promise me that I get dibs on any fights we end up in! I feel like I've been slacking the past month in the workout department!"

"Sounds good to me!" Luffy called to her from the harpoon, pulling at it with all of his might.

"What do you mean by 'fights?'" Ratchet asked, starting to look nervous. "Who do you expect to fight anyway?"

"Kyahahahaha! It's just a given that if I sail with these guys, we end up in a fight," the chocolatier laughed. Then she narrowed her eyes a bit. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Ratchet coughed quickly. "So, what do we do now? Wait for your friends to come and bring back some revelation that will cause lightning to strike down on a forest?"

"Hmmm...I've been giving this some thought," Damian folded his arms and looked down. "Maybe this thing isn't just for show. Maybe it is the key to everything..."

"What do you mean?" Pearl asked.

"Well, maybe Skinny-Glasses here was onto something when he hoped that a forest would be on the bottom of this lake thing," Damian frowned. "Isn't there, like, moss and seaweed on the bottom of the ocean? It kind of gives off a forest vibe if you think about it. I mean, I'm not a florist or anything, but it makes sense...at least to me."

"So where does the harpoon come into play?" Nami asked.

"Maybe it's a lightning rod or something? Barely anything in this song has been literal, but maybe if lightning strikes this thing, something will happen. Get it? The metal tip would act like an actual key! It's the key to everything!" Damian laughed to himself.

Only Steven and Luffy joined in with him.

"That...that sounds very convoluted," Pearl shook her head. "There is no way that something so specific could be the answer..."

"Why not? Everything else in this stupid song is convoluted too!" Amethyst pointed out. "Maybe lightning does have to hit this thing to get to the crown!"

"She's got a point," Garnet nodded. "The bomb man is probably on to something."

"...you people are weird," Honki frowned.

"Your face is weird," Genevieve countered.

"If the children are done arguing, allow me to test this idiot's theory," Nami cut the two off before they began to argue. She whipped out her staff, separated it into two parts, and began to blow into them. "**Cool Ball!**" Nami cried as she blew into the first one, producing several blue orbs that floated in the air. Following that, she began to do the same into the other one. "**Heat Ball!**" Just as before, orbs floated into the air. This time, however, their color was red. As the two sets of orbs collided, a dark cloud began to grow overhead.

"What a fascinating device!" Ratchet said, clearly intrigued.

"Yeah! I really am a genius, aren't I?" Usopp looked smug. "That was my greatest invention; the Clima Tact! I'm presently working on an upgraded model and..."

"Is this going to be enough energy to accomplish...well, whatever she is doing?" Ratchet asked Luffy, ignoring Usopp's boastings.

"Yup! It's super strong!"

"What...what am I even looking at?" Pearl asked. "What does this device even do?"

"Just watch," Nami smirked. She twirled around and pointed a piece of the staff at the cloud. "**Thunderbolt Tempo!**"

At once, a yellow orb shot out and joined the cloud looking overhead. Suddenly, lightning struck down from the sky and struck

the harpoon. The onlookers just watched in amazement as the surge of energy went down the weapon and into the ground itself. It began to disperse well-beyond the cave they were in and seemed to energize the ground of the entire island.

"THAT IS INCREDIBLE!" Connie clapped her hands. "YOU CAN CONTROL THE WEATHER!"

"That...how does that even work?!" Pearl asked in shock. "How did you even do that?!"

"It's a marksman thing," Usopp winked at her.

"Nice," Garnet nodded.

"But what did the lightning do?" Petrea asked, looking around. "Nothing has changed...has it?"

"You...you did it!" Ratchet began to maniacally laugh. "You magnificent bastard, you did it! Madame, you will forever have my gratitude for what you have done!"

"But...but what did I do?" Nami asked. Just as the words left her lips, the ground began to shake. "An earthquake?!"

Before anyone could make further inquiries, the ceiling began to collapse all around them. Large chunks of debris fell from the sky, practically crashing down on the pirate group. "Get close to me!" Steven yelled. "I'll protect you all with my awesome, newly-named ability: **Rose Quartz Bubble!**"

Rushing toward the boy, the remaining Straw Hats found themselves in range for Steven's familiar pink bubble. Garnet, enlarging her hands and stretching out her arms, grabbed Honki and Ratchet and forced them inside of the protective casing.

"Steven! That's such a great name!" Luffy clapped enthusiastically.

"Thanks! I put a lot of thought into it!" Steven blushed.

Genevieve blinked and stared at the two. "Really? A lot of thought? I...why am I even surprised at this point?"

"What do you expect from Steven?" Connie shrugged, causing the two girls to chuckle.

As they did so, the more serious members of the crew were focusing their attention on the two troublemakers. "You two have a lot of explaining to do!"

"Where is your third man?" Pearl demanded. "What did that lighting strike do?!"

"Just watch. All of your answers are being revealed to you," Ratchet grinned as his eyes scanned the room in triumph.

From inside of Steven's bubble, the pirates watched as the cave completely collapsed around them. This revealed the open sky and a new surprise. From the depths of the sea and near the small form of Ratchet's castle, a giant head arose in the distance and turned toward them. "Is...is that...?" Amethyst began to ask.

"A giant...a giant..." Pearl stammered.

"Oh. It's a turtle," Garnet shrugged.

"A TURTLE?!" everybody but Garnet, Ratchet, and Honki screamed.

"ARE YOU TELLING ME THIS ISLAND IS ON THE SHELL OF A GIANT TURTLE?!" Nami freaked out. "WHAT THE HELL?!"

"WHY IS IT SO BIG?!" Usopp screamed. "HIDE ME!"

"Oh! I know!" Luffy raised his hand in the air. "This is the guy who is going to lead us to the treasure!"

"Really?! This is gonna be great!" Steven's eyes grew wider as he dropped the bubble. "This is the best adventure ever!"

"Treasure? Treasure?! Are you really that dense that you think there is a treasure beyond this?" Ratchet laughed and moved himself away from Garnet. "There is so much of this that you don't understand!"

"Then please enlighten us, human," Pearl folded her arms. "If this is

going to continue, we need all of the facts."

"Exposition time!" Connie whispered to Steven.

"Expo-what?" Steven asked.

"I suppose I owe you an explanation...it all started when my father died and I was informed about the holy ruins on the top of this hill. It is there that I learned about just what this island was," Ratchet explained to them. "We are currently on the shell of a creature named Shimagame, who has allowed my people to live here for generations. She has been sleeping for over a thousand years...but it has been the responsibility of the males in my family to awaken the beast so she can lay her eggs...as told through the song that we finally deciphered."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Amethyst exclaimed. "Why didn't you just tell us this in the first place, bro?"

"Bad?' Didn't you pay attention at all?! There is no treasure, is there?!" Nami stamped her foot in anger.

"I never said that!" Ratchet hastily reminded her. "We still have yet to solve the part about the Golden Crown, so it might just exist after all. I just have my sights set on a larger goal..."

"I could give two craps about your goal! You knew that the song was about the turtle and you manipulated us into helping you!" Nami growled.

"She's right," Garnet said.

"And you knew that I was manipulating you from the beginning, but decided to come along anyway!" Ratchet shot back at her.

"He's also right," Garnet said again.

"How can they both be right?" Usopp asked.

"Pigheadedness," Garnet folded her arms.

"Regardless of this manipulation game, you were about to tell us

your end goal in all of this. It seems that merely allowing this noble creature the ability to lay her eggs was not the only objective here, so state your true purpose," Pearl demanded.

The man stopped for a moment and began to laugh sinisterly. Finally, he stepped away from the pirates and moved closer to Honki. "Yes, I suppose I can tell you our end goal. After all, I couldn't have done it without all of your help!"

"Wait, are we going to be enemies again?" Luffy frowned. "You're gonna try to steal all of our treasure for yourself!"

"NO! I don't care about treasure, you idiot! Even if I did, who even knows if it exists as anything other than a stupid metaphor or riddle!" Ratchet snarled with fury.

"There IS a treasure!" Luffy stood his ground. "There just has to be one! The Golden Crown is real! This treasure is for all of us!"

"Why can't you just accept the facts?!"

"Because Pearl wants it to exist...because I want it to exist!" Luffy adopted a serious look. "This turtle is going to take us to the Crown as thanks for waking it up...right after I kick your ass!"

"You have no proof!"

"Who cares about proof? If I say it exists, then it exists!" Luffy began to smile. "Got a problem with that?"

"Unfortunately, I do. See, you 'kicking my ass' would stop me from using this turtle to fulfill my dream!" Ratchet took a deep breath. "For you see...my dream is to rule the world!"

"Nooooooooo!" Steven went down on his knees and yelled to the sky. "How could you be so cruel?!"

"Steven, you are laying it on a little thick," Connie pointed out.

"But that's just so evil!"

"No, it's not. It's cliché. I mean, really? World domination?" Pearl

couldn't stop herself from laughing. "That's the best you can come up with?"

"What's wrong with my dream?!"

"It's not the act of having a dream, but that is the oldest dream in the book," Pearl scoffed. "All you humans dream of world domination only to see it fall apart at your fingertips. I mean, why does it matter so much? You live such a small, short life. It's not like you can take the world with you when you sidestep off of the mortal coil..."

"Pearl," Garnet coughed. "That was a bit much..."

"Why?" Pearl asked, clearly confused. "I was merely stating the truth and..."

"HEY! DON'T BELITTLE ME!" Ratchet was starting to get incredibly angry at this point.

"But you are doing that to yourself!" Petrea slapped her face. "Could you be anymore childish? I mean, who is going to accept you as leader of the world just because you have a giant turtle? Did you consider how the World Government would react?"

"Or the Shichibukai?" Zoro added.

"What about the admirals? That one ice guy beat our tails to the ground like it was nothing!" Amethyst shuddered. "I don't think you have thought this out very well..."

"SHUT UP! I was going to let you all live as thanks for getting me this far, but it seems like you are all going to be a problem!" Ratchet lifted his hand in the air and snapped his fingers. "You might as well just stay here and think about what you have done!"

"I've got a better idea: why don't we just fight and get this over with?" Zoro started to grab his swords. "We all know this is how this conflict is going to end, so why prolong it?"

"Please. If I tried to fight you, I have no doubt I would lose. I could stay here and 'get my ass kicked' or I could flee to begin my genius plan...what do you think I am going to choose?"

From the distance, a flying machine revealed itself. Steven narrowed his eyes to get a better look and saw that it was Maji flying on what appeared to be the bottom of Ratchet's boat. It seemed that Ratchet had given his boat the ability to its floor into base of a personal helicopter. How he did that was beyond the half-Gem but Steven was too amazed to question such minor details.

That changed when Ratchet and Honki grabbed onto a ladder that Maji dropped from the flying machine. Their escape was punctuated with one tiny problem: several bombs that they left behind.

Thinking quickly, Steven activated his bubble yet again and tried to get everyone under its protective surface. "**Rose Quartz Bubble!**" Unfortunately, he missed one person. As Steven was doing that, Petrea had taken the opportunity to jump in the air to try to catch the escaping inventor. Maji, seeing this, blindsided her by tossing one final bomb directly at her. With little time to spare, the chocolatier threw the device back at them, but it blew up too close to her to affect their escape.

"PETREA!" Damian yelled, watching in horror from inside the bubble.

All of the Straw Hats watched as her form hit the ground right after the bombs exploded all around them. At the first available moment, the youth dropped his shield and ran with his crew toward his friend. "Petrea! You can't get be hurt! Are you okay?!"

The woman's body was lifeless. Finally, her old partner began to push on her chest in a rhythmic motion. "Breathe...breathe, damn you!"

"You know CPR?" Nami asked, simultaneously worried and impressed.

"I'm a fireman," Damian reminded them as he continued his work. "Don't distract me!"

After a few moments, the blonde suddenly began to cough and weakly sat up. Tears streamed down several of the Straw Hats' faces as they sighed in relief. "What...what happened?"

"You idiot, don't do that again! You almost gave me a heart attack!" Damian sobbed.

"Did...did you just save my life?" Petrea asked, blushing.
"Damian...I...WHAT HAPPENED TO MY CLOTHES?!"

The woman looked down and saw that her new outfit was ruined. She turned around and saw that her dress was tattered and ripped. Realizing that she could not be seen walking around in rags, Pearl's gem lit up as she summoned the familiar Talisman of Cloth. "Stay still as I create you a new outfit," Pearl told her. "I'll do my best to make you something that looks similar to your destroyed dress..."

"He...the nerve of that little punk. Not only did he try to kill me, but he ruined my beautiful new dress!" Petrea stood up and found that she was losing balance. "Oh, I am just furious!"

"You need to calm down," Damian scolded her as he forced her to sit down. "You just needed CPR so I don't think that it is safe for you to..."

"Safe?!" Oh, that little blue-haired punk isn't going to be safe for long! I'm going to teach him some manners about treating a lady with respect!" Petrea tried to stand up again, only to find herself back on the ground. "I don't care about the Crown anymore...I just want to see that little worm crushed!"

"Holy shit," Zoro smirked. "I didn't think you still had that kind of rage left in you."

"Woah! Chocolate girl is hardcore!" Amethyst cheered. "Bust some heads in!"

"Come on, guys," Steven tried to keep the peace. "Do we really need to fight them? Maybe we can just talk it out?"

"Steven, that idiot just bombed us! The time for talking has passed! Now is the time for promised retribution!" Nami cracked her knuckles. "Petrea, put on the new outfit Pearl made for you and we'll find the others. We've got a castle to storm! As for all of you...turn around and give the lady some privacy!"

Rather quickly, the Straw Hats turned around as Petrea quickly clothed herself. From the distance, several voices could be heard coming their way. As they were still facing away from where the sounds were coming from, they were unable to see the arrival of the other members of their group. "We heard explosions! I am coming to save you, Nami-san!" Sanji was screaming as loud as he could. "If even a single hair on your head is hurt, I...PETREA-CHAN! CAN THIS BE HAPPENING?!"

"Oh brother," Nami groaned. "Of course he would show up now..."

"I'll kill him!" Damian cracked his knuckles, not daring to turn around.

"Down, Mr. Cook," Robin could be heard saying. "**Dos Fleur**. I do apologize, Miss Valentine. I've covered his eyes for you. We will give you all the time you need to make yourself proper..."

"Why are we turning around?" Peridot was asking. "Did we forget something at the human structure?"

"I...that is to say...um...i-it's a hu-human thing," Greg stammered, the embarrassment oozing out of his voice.

After a few moments, Petrea could be heard muttering and groaning as she finished getting dressed. "You all can turn around now! I'm decent...but still pissed!"

"I take it by your lack of surprise of the giant turtle that you were the ones who awoke Shimagame," Robin asked as everyone gathered together. "What did you do?"

"We charged the harpoon with electricity...don't ask of how that makes sense, but it worked," Nami lifted up her Clima Tact and gave it a wave. "Where have you all been off to?"

"We found this beautiful human structure full of gems and..." Peridot began to ramble on.

"What?! Gems?! Where?! Was it Malachite?!" Pearl practically fell on the floor in shock, causing Peridot to laugh.

"Nyehehehehe! Not 'Gems,' you clod. They were generic gemstones

embedded into the surface of the structure. It was truly a nice touch if I do say so myself," Peridot laughed. "Wait, who is Malachite?"

"Malachite is...wait, what?!" Steven jumped. "Why would Malachite be here?! Why would you say that, Pearl?"

"I...that is to say..." Pearl blushed, looking to Garnet for help. When she gave a short shake of her head behind Steven's back, the Gem sighed. "It's nothing, Steven. Just think of it as me still focused on our problems back home. Forget I mentioned her name."

"But who is she?!" Peridot asked again.

"I have a better question: how can you tell the difference between a regular gemstone and one of your gemstones?" Genevieve asked, ignoring Peridot's confusion. "I never thought about that before..."

"How do you humans tell the difference between those hideous wax sculptures in museums and other humans?" Pearl retorted as she composed herself, happy to redirect the conversation. "It is near-impossible for me to tell you all apart if you were standing still."

"Fair enough," Genevieve conceded. "Well, let's stop asking stupid questions and focus on our current problem. What was in this 'human structure' you all found?"

"A history of this island and a record of the turtle's past... Shimagame is the voice that Chopper kept hearing this entire time. Curious, isn't it?" Robin chuckled. "What about you? Where is our esteemed host?"

"He turned that boat we came here on into a plane and left us here while he concocts his 'evil plan,'" Connie used air quotes.

Sanji lit his cigarette and began to laugh to himself. "Oh joy. An evil plan. What is it this time? Is he trying to take over the world or something?"

"Yes," the young girl sighed. "It's kind of embarrassing."

"...you know, I was joking when I said that," Sanji groaned. "Well, I suppose we are the last line of defense between this idiot and him

getting slaughtered by the Marines?"

"That would be correct," Pearl created a spear. "We have to stop him before he hurts himself."

"Is ANYBODY concerned that he could actually do it? I mean, that's really scary to think about and..." Steven began before getting cut off.

"No," everyone replied in unison.

"How did he say he was going to attempt such a brazen idea?" Robin asked. "Did he give away any of his plan?"

"He said he was going to use the turtle or something," Usopp shrugged. "He was very vague."

"I can only imagine. How exactly is he planning on manipulating a living being to do his bidding?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," the liar looked down at the castle. "I guess we are going to storm the castle or something along those lines to bring him down?"

"That would be the logical conclusion, don't you agree?"

"Come on, it shouldn't be that hard!" Damian grinned and cracked his knuckles. "What is he going to do? Is he going to send his robot maids at us? His defense system was a joke and everything about him was a joke. This is going to be easy!"

Just as the words escaped his lips, the ground began to shake once more. From the distance, the castle started to move around. Before their eyes, the Straw Hats watched as the castle seemingly grew various thin legs and lifted itself off of the ground like a giant spider.

"...okay, maybe not as easy as I thought before," Damian muttered. "The castle moves...because of course it does! Why am I not even surprised anymore?!"

"Hmm...that reminds me of Blue Diamond's palanquin..." Garnet frowned. "Let's destroy it."

"Oh my stars! That is...that is...that human needed to have designed the castle for mobility from the beginning! The amount of foresight he put into it is nothing short of breathtaking and...wait, what did you say about the Diamonds?" Peridot stopped her gushing and turned toward Garnet.

"I said 'let's destroy it,'" Garnet turned her hands into gauntlets, causing Peridot to back away.

"Why don't my questions ever get answered?" Peridot mumbled to herself.

"But it is so cool!" Luffy whined. "How can we destroy something like that?!"

"Captain, might I remind you that if he finds any treasure, he will keep it all for himself..." Pearl coyly reminded him.

"HOW CAN HE BE SO GREEDY?!" Luffy started to run toward the building. "LET'S GO KICK SOME ASS!"

"Woohoo!" Amethyst cheered as she joined him.

"I still vote for talking it out!" Steven tried to keep up. "Come on, Connie!"

"Right behind you!" Connie followed along.

"Have fun, you guys! We'll hold down the fort here!" Usopp called to them, staying behind with Greg. "Keep us updated!"

Before the two of them knew it, Luffy's arms stretched toward them and grabbed them both. The two men yelled as they were forcibly drawn toward the mechanical lair of Lord Ratchet. The time for games had seemingly passed: it was time to make good on Nami's earlier threat. Ratchet would now have to face the combined power of the entire Straw Hat crew...

Heaven help him.

GWMAPT

By the time the crew had reached the castle, it had planted itself in the ground near the head of the giant turtle. At the same time, more mechanical structures jutted out from the side of what was now known to be Shimagame's shell and planted itself into the seafloor. After witnessing the damage Ratchet was doing, Luffy decided the only way to announce their presence was by breaking a hole into the wall of the castle. The crew walked inside and found that the hallway was full of mechanical gears and cogs moving at fast speeds, presumably to keep Ratchet's mechanical machinations in motion.

"I feel like we are in Dr. Rabatnik's castle," Steven said with awe. "This is seriously so cool!"

"Agreed," Peridot nodded, her eyes scanning the room. "The amount of material in this castle could be enough to build numerous 'Clusterbuster' Drills! To think it is being used for such a trivial purpose...it is almost offensively embarrassing and an affront to mechanics!"

"You seem rather passionate about this," Sanji commented.

"So what if I am? Metal has always called to me...I can't say why, but building things was always something that I found peace with on Homeworld. It was the closest thing I could do to having what you all call 'fun,'" Peridot sighed and put on a serious face. "Well, shall we commence with the 'kicking of asses?'"

"Peridot! Don't use such terrible language!" Pearl's hair shot up in anger. "Steven doesn't need to hear such vile words!"

"But he said it first!" Peridot whined. The Gem attempted to point toward Luffy, but he was nowhere to be found. He was not the only one: Amethyst, Zoro, Damian, Petrea, and Sanji had all vanished without warning. "Where did they go?!"

"They ran on ahead like the idiots they are," Nami grumbled. "We needed a plan, damn it!"

"It's okay, navigator. Sometimes it is best to just go with it. I have little doubt that this 'Ratchet' fellow will succeed in his plans," Garnet explained to her. "I wouldn't worry about it."

"I hope you are right...if we lose to this guy, I don't think I will be able to live with myself."

"Say...do you guys mind if I stay behind?" Chopper asked, looking outside toward the giant head of Shimagame. "I kind of want to try to talk to her some more."

"Do what you have to do," Garnet gave him a thumbs up. "We won't be long."

A familiar yell could be heard in the distance. Picking up that it was their headstrong crew mates, the remainder of the pirates ran toward the origin of the noise. There was little time to admire the mechanical beauties all around them as their focus was squarely on figuring out what Luffy had gotten himself into this time. Unfortunately, doing so allowed them to pass by the familiar figure of General Maji hiding between the gears.

"Hehehehe," he laughed to himself. "How utterly predictable." With that, he pulled a lever and watched as his enemies realized that the floor they were walking on had disappeared.

Thinking quickly, Garnet pulled everyone she could close to her before they could fall down the newly-created hole while Nico Robin used her abilities to use dozens of her arms to stabilize them midair.

"What the hell?!" Usopp screamed. "Where is the floor?!"

"Don't worry. I'll get us up in a moment," Robin tried to calm him. "Hold on tight, Garnet."

"Not a problem," the Gem nodded.

"Heh," Maji's voice rang out. "You guys aren't going anywhere."

In an instant, Maji pulled another lever that caused water to pour out from the ceiling down onto the pirates. Robin did her best to hold on, but found herself becoming weaker by the second. "Did I mention this is sea water? Your Devil Fruit powers won't do shit! Now stay put like the dogs you are!"

Unable to fight the current, the pirates landed onto a pile of garbage

below. Steven surveyed the room and noted that the walls were made of metal and the garbage was up to nearly their knees. Moving his feet around revealed that it was not merely garbage down there. The garbage contained a lot of water, seemingly also taken from the ocean. In the same room sat the Straw Hats who ran ahead, clearly victims to the same trap. All of the Straw Hats that consumed Devil Fruits were doing their best not to faint, but it was proving harder for some more than others.

"That...that blue-haired...asshole..." Petrea weakly groaned. "He...ruined...another damn dress!"

"Of all the things to worry about in this situation, you choose THAT?!" Genevieve admonished her.

"I'm...al-already pissed off," she bit her lip. "Don't...don't try me."

Steven opened his mouth to comment on the familiarity of the situation, but was stopped by Zoro before doing so. "I know what you are going to say. Just...just don't, kid. We get it. It's just like in that movie thing."

"But...but maybe there is a monster down here! Just like..." Steven tried again.

"No. Keep your mind in the present. We need to focus on getting out of here," Zoro grabbed his sword. "I've cut steel once. I think I'll do it again."

The swordsman prepared his stance to try to cut their way out of the room, but lost his footing on the wet garbage, almost slicing Sanji mid-swing.

"Watch it, you shitty swordsman!" Sanji roared and launched into an attack on Zoro, leading to the two fighting each other like little children.

"What was that about staying focused?" Pearl sighed and rubbed her gem. "Look, I doubt this human is using material that can withstand the combined power of a Gem fusion. Amethyst, would you do me the honor of forming Opal? I think Garnet has had her fun

for one day."

"Really?! Right now?!" Amethyst started to grin uncontrollably.

"FUSION!" Steven jumped for joy.

"Woo-hoo!" Luffy cheered weakly.

"Uh...is there gonna be enough room in here for...you know, ANY of your fusions?" Greg looked up at the ceiling.

"They'll be fine," Garnet smiled.

With that, the two Gems started to dance in the small area. Before their eyes, they combined together into a large, periwinkle woman with four arms and wavy white hair. She stretched her arms for a moment and cracked her neck. "Is anyone else cramped in here, or is it just me?"

"GAH!" Peridot fell backwards into the garbage pile, clearly in shock.

"GIANT WOMAN!" Steven's eyes lit up as the others took a moment to try to find their voices. Everyone was clearly shocked to see the presence of a Gem fusion.

"Hello to you too, Steven. Now...what was I doing again?" Opal asked, pondering for a moment.

"De-destroying that wall?" Nami pointed to the metal wall beside them.

"Ah! That's right! Thank you!" Opal bowed to the navigator. She summoned a giant bow and pulled back the string. As she did so, an arrow made of pure energy appeared. "Let's see...what is a good name for this attack? Oh! **Opalescent Arrow Shot!**"

She released the arrow toward the wall. Before it hit, it broke apart into several smaller arrows. With very little effort, the arrows destroyed the wall and revealed a path to freedom for the pirates. It appeared that they were elevated above the ground of another room by roughly seven feet. Entering through her newly-created doorway, Opal jumped down to the outside ground and started to grab her

comrades in each of her hands. She gently placed them down on the ground and looked around. "So...what is the plan now, captain?"

"YOSH! I CAN'T BELIVE HOW COOL YOU ARE!" Luffy yelled excitedly, his strength starting to return. "CAN YOU DO THAT ARROW THING AGAIN?"

Opal started to blush before getting distracted by a voice coming from behind her. "I wish that you wouldn't. You've already destroyed so much in such little time."

The fusion whipped around and saw two figures approach them. It was Roba and the elderly butler from the party. Roba gazed in awe at the giant woman while the butler merely pushed up his glasses. "I was going to use the trash release lever to get you all out of there, but your barrage seemed to beat me to the punch."

"I...that is to say..." Opal stammered, starting to get flustered. Almost instantly, the fusion broke back up into Pearl and Amethyst, who fell on the floor rather quickly.

"You did what you had to do to...I'm sorry my bothersome son did this to you," Roba rushed over to help the two Gems up. "Gonzou, my butler, has been trying to keep tabs on Ratchet, but we could never have thought that he would have done something this...this crazy! You nice young people are only in this situation because of me!"

"We don't blame you for him trying to kill us, old lady," Sanji frowned and moved away from Zoro before they started fighting again. "Still, did you know about the turtle?"

"I only just found out! How was I supposed to know that this island was on a turtle's back? Do you have any idea how crazy that sounds? Only the males in my family were allowed to know about that. Ratchet's father told him right before he died, and he never bothered to tell me about it. You have to believe me!"

"I think I can speak for everyone when I say that we do," Garnet spoke up. "But you need to be aware that we cannot allow your son to endanger himself or your world any further."

Roba was silent for a moment before she nodded her head in defeat. "I...I understand. He has taken this way too far. Please... please stop my boy before he does something he can't come back from. This is all my fault...if I didn't bring you here, he never would have been able to..."

"You can't beat yourself up for that, lady," Amethyst spoke up. "He would have done it eventually anyway. At least we are here to kick his butt into the ground!"

"With restraint if we can help it!" Greg added hastily. "We really don't want to hurt him or anything...right?"

"Yeah! This isn't about Skinny-Glasses or his plans! We are gonna stop him and then use the turtle to take us to the Golden Crown!" Luffy cheered.

Suddenly, a disembodied voice began to laugh all around them. Searching around for the origin of it, Robin quickly pointed to a small pipe in the corner of the room. "It's coming from there."

"You idiots are impossible to get rid of. Did you know that?" Ratchet's voice came from the pipe. "Still as stubborn as ever."

"Ratchet, please stop this stupid crusade and think about your people!" Roba made her way to the pipe and yelled into it. "You are going to hurt yourself!"

"Mother?! What are you doing down there?!" Ratchet asked.

"What am I doing down here? What are YOU doing trying to take over the world?!"

"I am following my dream! If you won't give me the respect I deserve, you can stay down there with them!" Ratchet spat. "It is time to initiate the final part of this operation and I will NOT have some stupid pirates get in my way!"

"Say...if Ratchet is talking through the pipe, wouldn't that mean that following the pipe would lead us to Ratchet?" Connie asked.

"A damn good idea!" Luffy grinned. "Hey! Skinny-Glasses! I'm gonna

find you and I'm gonna kick your ass!"

With that, Luffy began to punch the ceiling where the pipe was sticking out from and forced it loose. Bending down, he jumped up to the next level of the building and began to run aimlessly in the hopes of finding his opponent. Following his lead, the other pirates did the same, with the Gems and Robin helping those who could not reach up there themselves. Only one person attempted to stay behind with Roba and Gonzou.

"Peridot, what are you doing?" Robin called to her from the hole Luffy created. "We need to keep moving forward."

"I know! I...I will catch up to you in a moment," Peridot replied with a smile. "I have a brilliant idea! You need to trust me!"

Before Robin or any of the others could respond, Garnet cut in and gave her a nod. "Okay. We trust you."

"Garnet, you can't be serious!" Pearl flipped out.

"I'm ALWAYS serious," Garnet told her. "Come on. Let her be. She'll be okay."

As Peridot heard the other scurry away, she turned to the two humans and coughed. "Now then, I assume your human offspring has a storage supply of materials and metals, correct? Show them to me."

The two exchanged looks of concern before pointing toward a door. "Right this way."

Peridot followed the two of them to a room full of discarded robots, worn down machinery, and even some of the remnants of the giant fan from earlier. The Gem picked up a piece of metal and examined it. "Nyehehehehe! This will do nicely!"

The Golden Crown

In the top of his castle, Ratchet observed his masterpiece. He had finally done what no other male in his family had attempted to do: he had gained control of Shimagame the turtle. At last, the island was in a position to be placed entirely in his control. Nothing and no one could stop him...

Except for the combined might of the Straw Hat pirates and the Crystal Gems.

"Sir, the pirates escaped the lower level and are making their way here!" General Honki reported to his master. "What are we going to do?! We can't take these guys on in a fight!"

"Perhaps...or perhaps not. It is time to initiate the final step in our plan," Ratchet grinned as he walked over to his series of pipes. Moving to the last one, he flipped it open and began to speak into it. "General Maji, can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear!" the voice of his blue-haired general responded.

"Good. It is up to you to intercept and stop those damned pirates! We are counting on you to succeed!"

"Roger! I won't let you down!" Maji replied.

"Do you want me to go too?" Honki asked.

"Of course! Two heads are better than one. I cannot afford to leave this to chance...not so close to the finish line. We'll show those ingrates just who can have a thought-out plan..." Ratchet began to bite his lip in frustration. "Go! Make me proud!"

"Will do!" Honki ran with great speed toward the exit. Ratchet was now the only living creature in the room. However, he was not alone. Surrounding him were a dozen robotic maids, each perfectly in place to begin the final stages of Ratchet's masterplan.

"Run while you can, pirate scum. With the press of this button, the

world is mine!" Ratchet laughed maniacally.

He pressed down on the button placed directly in front of him and watched as his castle began to sprout over a hundred large, thick metallic ropes from the ground. They began to cover every inch of the giant turtle, putting Ratchet in a place to control every movement she made. By pulling one set of levers connected to the ropes, he could force the creature to move where he wanted through forcibly moving the fins of the beast.

"I don't know why my family didn't exploit Shimagame before this..." Ratchet mused to himself before forcing his turtle-fortress to start swimming toward the nearest island. He did not care that he was probably causing the animal pain. All that mattered was his goal of global conquest.

"I'm such a genius!"

GWMAPT

As the crew made their way through Ratchet's castle, they found that it was easier to let Luffy do what he was doing so they could keep moving forward. Trap after trap was set for them, seemingly put in place in case of emergencies, and each trap was overcome with ease. "Seriously, who puts a mechanical glove holding a hammer into the wall?" Genevieve stopped to play with the latest obstacle Zoro had cut apart. "I can't decide if this guy is a genius or an idiot."

"Be nice! I still think this is really cool! It is like we are living a video game!" Steven protested. "I think that it is good that he has a hobby!"

"Steven, his hobby was designed with killing us in mind! That isn't something to be admired!" Usopp chided him.

"If you want to stay here and play with the stupid hands, be my guest. I'm going to go take this clown down a few notches," Zoro yelled to them and started running again toward another hallway.

"The swordsman is right. We aren't going to accomplish anything

sitting around here," Garnet agreed and joined him. "Come on! Keep up!"

Just as the remainder of the group was going to do so, Nami's eyes began to widen with fear. "Oh no. Oh no! This is not good!"

"What?! What's wrong?!" Connie asked in a worried tone. "Is it another trap?!"

"No! I just realized that we have been following Zoro this entire time!" Nami hit herself in the face. "We are probably nowhere NEAR getting to that idiot!"

There was a pause as they considered Nami's words before the pirates made a mad dash to overtake the swordsman from leading the group. Zoro was known for three things: his skill in battle, his love of liquor, and his horrible sense of direction. Following him was a death sentence and everybody knew it.

"Shitty moss-head! If your shitty lack of direction harms a hair on any of these pretty ladies' heads, I will kill you!" Sanji growled as loud as he could.

Finally, the large group of twelve reached the end of the hallway with Zoro and Garnet waiting for them. The swordsman was looking impatient and annoyed at the sight of his companions. His ire was specifically directed at Sanji.

"Oy!" Zoro tapped his sword impatiently on the ground. "If you are going to threaten me, do it to my face!"

"Gladly, you shitty moss-head!" Sanji grinned and went to strike Zoro. However, his attack was stopped by Garnet almost immediately.

"Down, boy. There will be none of that," the Gem told him. "Open the door so we can move forward."

Obliging the Gem, Zoro opened the door and revealed another hallway that split into three different directions. Upon looking at the sight, Nami let out a giant sigh and rubbed her forehead. "Of course there are multiple paths to choose from. Why am I not surprised

here?"

"This really IS like a video game," Connie went and peeked down each hallway. "Only one will probably lead to Ratchet. The rest will probably lead to a trap or even loop back around here, like in *Super Mueo Bros.* for King Kupla's castle! This is exciting!"

"I know!" Steven whispered.

"...so are we going to do what I think we are going to do?" Greg asked, looking nervous. "Because I think we know what we are going to do."

"It is the best way for us to cover enough ground in the fastest amount of time," Robin pointed out. "Besides, I think we all will be fine. We are all rather experienced at this."

"Speak for yourself..." Greg muttered.

"Am I the only one who is lost here? What the heck are you talking about?" Usopp asked, clearly confused.

"It means..." Greg sighed. "It means we need to split up, gang."

"WHAT?! THAT IS A TERRIBLE IDEA! WE ARE STRONGER IN NUMBERS!" Usopp freaked out.

Trying to calm him down, Nami slapped him in the back of the head. "Can it! Use your head. There are fourteen of us here and three paths. That means there are four or five of us per path! We took down Captain Kuro with four people, and I can guarantee that he was stronger than this clown. That's not even counting how five of us saved Cocoyashi Village from Arlong...or did you forget that, brave warrior of the sea?"

Usopp tried to protest it, but shut his mouth. Finally, he pointed to Garnet. "I call Garnet's group!"

"Wise choice," Garnet smiled. She paused and kept quiet for a moment. Finally, she motioned toward the middle path. "Chocolate woman, I advise you to go down that path. You'll be quite happy."

Petrea cocked her head as she tried to figure out what she was talking about before her eyes widened in realization. "Oh. Oh! I don't care who follows me, but that asshole is mine!"

With that, the chocolatier sprinted down the path and quickly faded out of sight. Amethyst, grinning ear to ear, quickly ran to follow her. "Woohoo! This is gonna be great!"

"...somebody is going to need to keep them out of trouble," Nami groaned. "Fine, I'll walk into the incredibly obvious trap."

"I'LL COME TOO, NAMI-SAN!" Sanji immediately volunteered.

"Damn it! You shouldn't be moving so fast, Petrea!" Damian started to follow after her, but was stopped by Zoro.

"They'll be fine. If we want to be smart about this, we should have at least one person with an offensive Devil Fruit in each group. Since Greg hasn't quite figured out how to do that yet, we need you here."

"I...I hate it when you make sense," Damian folded his arms.

As the first group disappeared before their eyes, the remainder of the pirates looked to Garnet for advice. "So...which one gets us to Skinny-Glasses?" Genevieve finally asked. "We all know that you know."

"All ways lead to him," Garnet said vaguely. "But all ways can lead to additional confrontation."

"WHAT THE HELL DOES THAT MEAN?!" Zoro and Damian yelled together.

"It means that we are walking into a trap no matter which path we choose with no guarantee that we will reach that bespectacled human," Pearl grinned and clutched her spear. "There is only one thing we can do if we want to move on."

"Spring the trap?" Steven suggested.

"Spring the trap," Pearl nodded. "Keep your eyes open, Steven. You too, Connie. Things might get dangerous."

GWMAPT

Petrea was feeling lighter than air.

Though the chocolatier could actually make herself that light, she was more elated to get revenge on General Maji for the countless insults he brought about on her friends. Yes, she was specifically angry for the countless articles of clothing that were ruined by his actions. However, she did not consider herself that petty that it was her primary reason for revenge. He was the man who practically destroyed Merry, bombed them in the hopes of killing them, and tried to trap them in a garbage heap.

It just so happened that most of those instances resulted in her dress getting ruined, slowly causing her to get angrier and angrier in the process.

She ran forward without even being curious about the lack of traps in the hallway, which had turned into a stairwell. All she focused on was reaching the end of the stair and, if her reading of Garnet's vague suggestion was accurate, her chance to give Maji a piece of her mind. It did not help that Amethyst was egging her on the entire way, riling her up more than she would have typically been.

"Girl, you are gonna beat the tar out of that guy! He has no idea what's coming!" Amethyst was laughing.

Petrea did not respond to the comments, but kept her focus ahead. This was something she had to do. This was her chance to prove to herself that she was still a valuable part of this crew. Yes, she had fought with them before and had participated in the Davy Back Fight, but she FINALLY considered herself a full-time member of the Straw Hat crew. While it was true that she now considered Beach City her home, but this was different. The former Miss Valentine had reached a point where she would fight for these people not out of obligation or for atonement, but rather because it is what she felt was right. Petrea would be a Straw Hat until the day she died and for that, she would gladly join them into battle.

Again, the fact that this battle happened to be against an individual that made her severely angry was just a bonus.

"Can you guys please slow down and think about this?! We are going to get ourselves killed if we don't go into this without a plan!" Nami yelled from behind.

"I think the plan is to win," Amethyst shot back.

"THAT'S NOT A PLAN!"

As Nami and Amethyst began to bicker about how to approach the situation, Petrea spied a door at the end of the staircase. At last, her end goal was in sight. This would be a deciding moment in her life. Nothing and no one would stop her now. "**1 Kilo!**" Changing her weight and clutching onto the umbrella that she held onto at all times, she bypassed the remainder of the stairs and landed right outside of the door.

"Don't you dare do this without me right there to watch!" Amethyst yelled up. She curled herself up and prepared to spin dash. "Wait... I've got to do the thing. I got this! **Revved-Up Rampage!**" The Gem charged her way up the stairs and knocked the door completely down. Petrea, not even bothering to look, ran alongside her.

Of course, the two found themselves on a small platform on the outside of the castle. Amethyst barely stopped herself in time, but Petrea knocked into her and sent the two of them flying off the edge of the castle. Thinking quickly, Amethyst used one of her whips to grab onto the small platform and another to grab her friend. Peering out of the open door, Sanji and Nami stared down and saw the predicament that the two of them found themselves in.

"...see what happens when you rush into things without a plan?" Nami sighed. "Come on, Sanji. Let's pull these two up before... what's that?"

The navigator looked up and saw exactly what Petrea wanted to see: General Maji the floor above them. He gave a quick wave and pulled a lever. Just as he pulled it, the platform immediately gave way. This caused Amethyst and Petrea to start falling. "AMETHYST! PETREA!"

"They'll be okay, Nami-san," Sanji reminded her as he watched the

two fall. "Though it pains me to say it, we need to let them go for now. Petrea-chan can control her own weight and Amethyst is some kind of rock powerhouse. They'll be able to get each other to safety before you know it. I think now would be a good time to get back to the ship before this shitty turtle swims completely away from it."

Nami looked down and then up, where Maji flipped her off and ran inside. Getting irritated, Nami grabbed her Clima Tact and nodded. "I'm taking the lead! I stashed the waver on the shore last night while everyone was sleeping...we can use that to get back to the ship!"

"Why didn't you say anything before about that?"

"I don't like bragging about things I do in secret! Besides, if that idiot got wind from Luffy that we even had a Skypeian device capable of riding on water, he would have confiscated it and tried to dismantle it!" Nami grabbed him and ran. "Stop asking questions and just follow my lead!"

"Ah, my sweet! So properly prepared! How I love it!" Sanji gushed.

As this was happening, Amethyst summoned another whip and brought Petrea close to her. Together, the two of them started to plummet down toward what appeared to be a mine cart track. They stopped just short of a stationary cart. "Ugh, that was, like, a two-point landing at most," Amethyst groaned. "You okay?"

"Just peachy..." Petrea used the umbrella as a tool to help her get up. She looked up to the castle and saw that the track went upwards to a higher section. "Who the hell builds a mine cart track in a castle? Seriously, nothing about this place makes any logical sense."

"I dunno. I think it's pretty cool," Amethyst poked the mine cart and watched as it immediately sped off down the track away from the castle. "Something tells me we were supposed to land in this thing and fall to our death..."

"No...look at the tracks. They go into the castle. If that idiot wanted it to be a pure dead end, it would have just started on the side of the building without going anywhere...I'd bet my chocolate shop that our

blue-haired asshole is going to come flying down the tracks from up there in some kind of death machine," Petrea paused and thought about it for a moment before smiling. "Would you like to join me in beating him to the punch?"

"Girl, I'd join you in any beating you want to give this creep!" Amethyst laughed as she changed her physical form into a large racecar. "Let's do this!"

"Oh, let's do!" Petrea gave a chilling smile as she hopped in her friend. "Kyhahahaha! Let's ride!"

GWMAPT

After pulling the lever and watching the two annoying women fall down on the track, General Maji gave a quick wave to the other pirates and ran back inside. It was amusing to him to taunt these fools before watching them get swept away in Lord Ratchet's traps. Sure, the two people who destroyed the defense system and the lady with the sunglasses would be trouble, but the rest seemed harmless. Hell, they had three kids running around with them and two who could potentially be children as well. Maji didn't really understand why they were green and purple, but he did not care. All that mattered was seeing his lord's plan through.

Making his way to a secret entrance, Maji found himself in front of Lord Ratchet's gift to him: a giant bike that could ride on the tracks. It had a large, skull figurehead at the front with a sharp, pink tongue coming out of the mouth. Maji knew that the two victims of his trap would have found themselves in the mine cart left for them by now and would no doubt discover the brake switch. He was counting on them being too busy looking forward to notice his bike coming from behind, using the sharp tongue as a battering ram to send them to a watery demise below.

"Oh man! These broads are just asking for it!" Maji chortled maniacally as he revved up his bike and started racing down the track like a demon on wheels. "I can't wait to see their faces when I ram them in the...the...WHAT THE HELL?!"

Coming directly at him was a giant, purple racecar with eyes for

headlights. He was so shocked to see the inexplicable form that he failed to notice who was driving it: that damned blonde with the lemon earrings who had tried to stop him when he bombed the Straw Hats in the cave. Where did she find this vehicle? How did she get it to go up the track? What did she hope to accomplish?!

"ARE YOU INSANE?!" Maji screamed at her. "DON'T YOU REALIZE THAT I AM GOING TO RAM YOU RIGHT OFF OF THE TRACK?!"

"1 Kilo! Oh, you poor, rude, pompous, little man," the woman smiled as she jumped up out of the car. She floated high in the air, causing Maji to lose track of the car in front of him. He expected his bike to ram right into it while he used the hidden weapons in the bike to take care of the girl.

He was not counting on the car turning into a large, purple wrestler with a practically bare chest and a mask on its face. The wrestler grabbed the bike with both hands and, with a mighty push, crushed the front of the bike in two. "Sup?"

"GAH?!" Maji jumped out from the bike before he would join its fate. "WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED?!"

"You messed with the chocolate lady," the wrestler grinned and pointed up. "Big mistake, dude."

"Wh-what?" Maji whispered before realizing that the shadow of her umbrella was directly over him.

"Time to show you what I do to rude people like you who have no respect for other people's property," the blonde smirked with glee. **"10,000 Kilo Press!"**

That cry was the only warning Maji received before the woman came pummeling down onto him. The second her form hit his body, he felt the life practically leave him as he was seemingly crushed by a ton of bricks. The wooden mine cart track cracked beneath them as both of them continued to fall toward the water below. His mind began to race as he realized that this woman clearly ate a Devil Fruit. She was sacrificing herself to seemingly kill him.

What was wrong with these pirates?!

Before he knew it, the woman switched tactics and jumped off of his now-broken body and floated back up to the fractured track. This had the unfortunate side effect of causing Maji to fall faster and harder. He braced himself to die at the sea below when he found himself getting caught by the purple wrestler, swinging down on some kind of whip that was tied onto a more stable section of the track. He had no idea where it had come from, but he was thankful nevertheless. "Don't worry, blue-hair. We aren't going to let you die...but I don't know if my girl is done with you yet. She's got some unfinished business with you before we meet back up with our squad up there."

He weakly peered up and could make out the blonde giving a small wave to him. She grabbed the whip from its secure spot and began to pull it up like it was nothing. Realizing that he was in for a world of hurt, Maji did the only sensible thing and stopped fighting the pain inflicted by the woman's attack. His world went black with an odd laugh being the last thing he processed.

"Kyhahahaha!"

GWMAPT

"So, do you think Ratchet has minions under mind control?"

"That seems unlikely, Steven," Pearl told her charge. "If he had mind control abilities, he would have used them by..."

"Oh! What if he has little animals piloting his robots? We need to break them open and free them!"

"Steven, that is incredibly ludicrous and..."

"Maybe we will have to use the powers of his robot traps against other robot traps that are weak against those powers so we can get THEIR powers!"

"Wait...who has what power? I don't..."

"What if he attacks us with a flying car with a clown face, throwing

little robots at us that we can toss back at him?"

This was the scene as Steven, Connie, Zoro, Damian, and Pearl ran down their own path. Steven could not stop asking questions about the nature of the mechanical castle they were now storming. As the only one who realized what he was asking about was Connie, the older members of the crew were completely lost.

"Kid, what the hell are you talking about? You are making even less sense than usual," Zoro asked as he kept his fast pace toward the end of the hallway.

"It's not worth it, sir...err...Zoro!" Connie blushed. "You wouldn't understand..."

"Fine by me. I just want to find this twerp and get on with it," Zoro looked around and stopped. "Man, have we been going backwards this whole time? This hallway looks familiar..."

"Looping hallways! We officially have looping hallways!" Steven clapped his hands.

"Steven, the hallways are not looping. Don't work yourself up," Pearl put her hand on Steven's back and then turned her attention to Zoro. "As for you, I can assure you we have been going forward this entire time."

"But can we be SURE about that?"

"...reasonably," Pearl sighed and went over to examine a window in the wall. She looked out and saw the giant head of Shimagame, clearly in pain from Ratchet's machinations. "I have to admit...this was not the type of adventure I was expecting when I first heard about it. The treasure hunt was nice, true, but I can't let go and enjoy myself here."

"Pearl?" Steven asked.

"The captain might find this to be a fun little romp, but look at that poor creature. This human is manipulating her and wounding her and for what? A petty goal that has no chance to succeed. Even when he is stopped, what good will come from this? The turtle will

remember the burden that she underwent and will no doubt feel betrayed. What if these humans lose their homes because of this? What if the giant turtle is irrevocably hurt?" Pearl bit her lip and sank her head.

"And what if they don't?" Steven moved closer to her and grabbed her hand, squeezing it tight. "Pearl, you have always taught me that things happen that we can't control. Why are you focusing so much on the bad things here when you should be focusing on the good?!"

"Steven, I fail to see the good that can..."

"If we weren't here, Shimagame would have eventually been woken by Ratchet and then he would have fully used her for his evil plans!" Steven passionately explained. "I don't know if it would have happened now or not, but we are going to save her from so much more pain. Maybe she will see the good we are doing for her and won't distrust humans like you said...maybe she will be grateful."

Pearl pondered Steven's words and looked into his eyes. They were so innocent and pure. No matter what the world threw at him, he seemingly always managed to look at the positivity in any situation. Rose was the same way, even when she was forced to do something that truly haunted her. In the end, the goodness in others is what kept Steven going and what caused those who he counted on as friends to keep believing in him. When faced with that, Pearl could do nothing more than force a smile.

"Maybe she will, Steven. Maybe she will...but we will never know just standing here! Come on, folks! Let's go save the day and ask the giant turtle which we are standing on to take us to the Golden Crown!" Pearl laughed triumphantly.

"Golden Crown! Golden Crown! Golden Crown!" Steven and Connie chanted together. They ran on ahead of everyone, with Pearl chasing behind them.

"Ugh. Kill me now," Zoro groaned as he began to run after them.

"Come on. Even you have to admit it pumps you up," Damian commented and nudged him in the chest. "The kid just gives off an

air of positivity that is just contagious."

Zoro swatted his hand away and kept running. "Says the man who was at one point a feared assassin."

"TO the deadly pirate hunter whose name was known across the world," Damian grinned. "I guess we both have come a long way since we set out to sea."

"So you say," Zoro muttered before stopping again. He closed his eyes and listened around. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Damian asked, looking around the hallway. "All I hear are the kids chanting up ahead."

"We aren't alone," Zoro grabbed his sword and sliced it several times at the wall. "**Oni-Giri!**"

The wall crumbled apart and revealed a giant, mechanical creature. It had a metal face and two giant cannons on the shoulders. His chest contained two metal latchets that looked to be connected to a string. On its back was a giant tan container that linked up to the cannons. The monster stepped back as if it were in confusion. Barely reacting, Zoro used a single swipe to cut down the face plate. The two males watched as the metal face revealed itself to be a mask hiding the familiar face of General Honki.

"How...how...?" Honki gasped, trying to catch his breath. "How did you know I was there?!"

"You are louder than you let on," Zoro gripped his sword tight and pointed it at his opponent's face. "Now, what do you intend to do with this mecha-gorilla suit?"

"Kill you where you stand! I'm not going to let you stop Lord Ratchet's dream!" Honki snarled and started to pull the latches on his chest. With each pull of the string, his chest began to glow orange.

Zoro and Damian merely stared and did not look impressed. "...he's turning into a night light?" Zoro asked.

"I'm so scared. Is this supposed to intimidate us?" Damian started to laugh.

"No. But this is!" Honki dropped to his knees and pointed the cannon tips right at the two Straw Hats. They watched as it shot out a pure burst of energy right at them. Damian, for his part, looked unconcerned as he threw off his shirt and took the blast directly in the chest. To the shock of the general, Damian looked practically unharmed. "WHAT THE HELL?!"

"That was quite a blast. What was it? An energy bomb? Impressive," Damian cracked his neck and checked himself out. "I'd say I still got it."

"How...HOW?!" Honki stammered in fear.

"I ate the Bomb Bomb Fruit. Bombs and bomb-like explosions don't affect me. Now that you know that and can see that my friend here can cut through steel, allow me to ask you again: is this supposed to intimidate us?"

Honki looked to Zoro, who patted his swords at his side, and Damian, who adjusted his sunglasses and was preparing to drop to his knees. However, he was alerted to three figures running at him from down the hallway: Steven, Connie, and Pearl. "Ha! There is no way you'd attack me when your pesky kid sidekicks are in harm's way!"

"Zoro! Damian! We heard noises and...gah!" Steven was shouting as he came across the robotic warrior. Honki jumped up and lunged toward the trio. However, Steven grabbed Connie's and Pearl's hands tight and closed his eyes. "**Rose Quartz Bubble!**" By the time Honki reached them, they were safely guarded in Steven's familiar pink sphere. "Is...is that a robot General Honki?" Steven asked while trying to keep his concentration.

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE?!" Honki screamed as he pounded the walls of the bubble. "THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING!"

"I...I think that IS General Honki," Connie revealed. "He's just in a robot suit!"

"Robot suit!" Steven whispered with glee. "I want one!"

"Steven, now is not the time to be impressed with the machine trying to kill us!" Pearl reminded him. "Keep the bubble going as long as you can and when you drop it, I will take it from here."

"It's okay, Pearl," Zoro called to her ominously. "You don't have to worry about this guy."

"Yeah," Damian sauntered up and moved toward Honki. "Leave it to us. After you, asshole."

"Thanks, pansy," Zoro grinned.

It was then that Honki's poundings grew faster and harder. However, instead of trying to break it open, it was clear he had a different goal in mind. "LET ME IN! I SURRENDER! PLEASE! PLEASE! DON'T LET THEM KILL ME!"

"Kill?" Steven whispered.

"They aren't going to kill anyone, Steven," Pearl put her hand on his shoulder. "It is just the last desperate attempt of a dangerous person trying to hurt us."

Steven was silent for a moment before dropping the bubble and moving in front of the shaking General Honki. He put his hands up and stood his ground. "Damian, Zoro...please. You won. He surrendered. We won. Please let him go!"

"...what? You...you are protecting me?!" Honki was taken back by Steven's show of kindness.

"Kid...don't," Damian threw his hands up. "He's one of Ratchet's guards! He has been trying to kill us all damn day! What right does he have to surrender?"

"What right do you have to condemn him?!" Steven shouted back. "We aren't here to beat people up! We are here to save Shimagame from Ratchet! Why do you want to fight him so bad?!"

Damian and Zoro looked to each other and then back to Steven. His

eyes were wide and pleading. He truly believed that fighting this man was not the answer. If they attack him now, they would be no better than his partner was for bombing them earlier. Finally, Zoro lowered his weapons and Damian let out a huge sigh. "Okay...you win, Steven. We accept your surrender, mecha-gorilla."

"You do?" Honki pointed to himself.

"We do...but only if you tell us where your boss is," Zoro glared at him intently. "Think long and hard...remember what all of us can do. Remember how weak you are. Remember the kindness of Steven here, who is the only reason we aren't using violent force right now to get what we want."

Honki looked fearfully at the two men and then down at the boy standing in front of him. Try as he might to find it in him to hurt him in the name of Lord Ratchet, Honki collapsed and fell to his knees. "Thank you, kid! I...I don't know where he is. If I were to guess, he would be up on the control room...but I swear I don't know!"

"Can you show us where the control room is, Mr. Honki?" Steven asked.

Hanging his head low, Honki nodded. "If that's what I have to do to repay you for not killing me...then that's what I'll do. Come on, I know a shortcut."

"Fine, but the second you try anything, your ass is ours," Zoro reminded him.

"D-Duly noted," Honki gulped.

As the group began to follow the large man, Pearl looked on Steven with pride. 'He is just like Rose...always hoping for the best in people. I will never stop being amazed at him...never.'

GWMAPT

"Do you guys think the kids are okay? I really should have went with them," Greg asked to his group.

Racing down the third hallway as fast as he could, Greg was joined

by Garnet, Genevieve, Usopp, and Robin. Garnet was, of course, leading the way while he was trailing behind. Greg was never the most physically fit, but he did this as a chance to get closer with his son. The magical adventures the Gems went on were often no place for him to be around, but this was a bit different. Eating his Devil Fruit meant that he was more geared for this type of adventuring than even the Gems. He was in a very unique position to be a part of both this dimension and the world he called home, and it scared the man. While his world was no stranger to giant wars with major casualties, violence seemed to be rather commonplace on the Grand Line.

Greg was not exactly a violent man, nor did he like Steven or Connie being exposed to it.

Thankfully, the Straw Hats have proved time and time again that they respected his wishes and cared for his son. They wanted what was best for all of them. For that, Greg put aside several of his reservations and trusted Steven to do the right thing. Besides, Pearl was with them and she could easily handle any situation she was thrown in...so long as it wasn't emotional.

That was a door Greg did not want to open even wider, but hoped that one day would finally close.

"Greg, I can assure you that Steven and Connie are both fine. There is nothing to be concerned about...turn right up here," Garnet commented.

"I...I hope so," Greg gulped. "I just worry; you know?"

"As any good parent should," Robin reassured him. "Your boy has taken care of himself before and we all know he is in good company."

"Zoro and Damian are considered 'good company?' Ha!" Usopp laughed.

"I don't think that's helping with Mr. Universe's concerns," Genevieve pointed out.

"It's...it's okay," Greg stopped for a moment to catch his breath. "Give me a second, guys. I'm pooped."

"Good idea. All of this work is killing me," Genevieve collapsed next to him.

"Agreed," Garnet nodded as the group allowed him a chance to breath. "I believe we are very close to the hallway's end."

"Do we have any idea what we will even find there?" Usopp asked. "What are the odds of that Ratchet guy even being there?"

"We aren't going after Ratchet," Garnet explained. "The path we have been following leads directly to the control room of this fortress. It is the central hub that controls the giant being we are currently standing upon."

"WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL US THAT IN THE FIRST PLACE?!" Usopp yelled.

"It didn't matter at the time. It still doesn't. Technically, Ratchet might be found in that room, but I doubt it. By now, he has probably ascended to the roof of the castle to do what every possible future I saw would end in."

The four of them waited for the Gem to elaborate. When she did not do so, it was Greg who finally asked. "Which would be...?"

"A confrontation with Pirate Captain Luffy in some homemade robotic machine."

Greg let out a laugh. "Really? A final battle on the top of a castle in a giant robot? Man, Steven was right. This really is like some kind of weird video game."

"So if our captain is distracting our host, then it will be up to us to free Shimagame?" Robin asked.

"Correct. Everybody has their part to play in this game...I suggest we play it," Garnet got up and started to continue on the path. "The sooner we get there, the sooner we will be through with this. The others should be finishing their confrontations by now. I'd like to get

there before they do."

Before anyone could respond, a rumbling could be heard from below them. The pirates looked down as if to try to figure out what it was from before Garnet barked at them. "Move! Now! Something is coming up at us!"

With that, a large mechanical creature jumped through the floor. Without acknowledging the others in the room, the being jumped through the ceiling and made its way up to the next level. The action left them all bewildered and speechless. After a moment, Garnet looked up and let out a low whistle. "I did not see that coming."

GWMAPT

As Garnet stated, Luffy had managed to make his way to the top of the castle by running outside and flinging himself to the roof. At first, he was disappointed to learn that Ratchet was not up there. However, the man was watching the pirate captain and had come to the conclusion that he would have to deal with him personally.

Entering the roof in a giant mechanical fighter with an exposed cockpit and a drill on his chest, Luffy was immediately impressed with its design and expressed how cool it looked. That did not stop Ratchet from attacking him, shooting the machine's hands out at him and trying to drill him into the ground. Luffy, being Luffy, barely noticed the effort and was dodging every attack thrust upon him by his opponent.

"Why do you even bother fighting back? This machine is stronger than you will ever be! Accept that I am better than you in every conceivable way!" Ratchet laughed.

"No way!"

"Then you will die a painful death! Feel the wrath of the Iron Man Mark 28 Mecha!" Ratchet went down to strike Luffy before realizing the ground he stood on was beginning to shake. "What the hell is going on?! It can't be my machine...can it?!"

Finally, Ratchet and Luffy jumped out of the way as a giant robot

made its way from the floor. It was a stout, green robot with two giant cogs on the sides of its chest separating the main body from the arms. The arms were connected to the cogs by giant yellow ball-joints, with the hands containing four green fingers. Instead of legs, the machine's lower body seemed to be a giant green and black sphere that could roll around and bounce in order to move. However, the revealing factor was the head, which was bare and revealed a familiar figure piloting it: "Get away from my captain, you clod!"

"PERIDOT?! AWESOME!" Luffy's eyes turned to stars. "YOU TURNED INTO A ROBOT!"

"Not quite, captain. I merely utilized pieces from this human's discarded parts. The Peribot Mark Two is primitive and won't quite last in battle longer than its intended purpose, but it is more than adequate to do what I want!" Peridot pointed her robot's finger directly at Ratchet. "Captain, may I have your permission to defend your honor against this disgrace to the label of 'genius?!' His mere presence offends me and his actions against this island are unacceptable!"

"Genius?! You dare claim to think I am not a genius?! Do you not see this technological marvel which you are presently walking upon?! Do you not see my mighty armor?!" Ratchet started to turn beat red, forcing him to have his glasses wipe themselves once again.

"I do! You are no genius, human. Your creativity, I concede to you, is admirable, but you have no right to that title!" Peridot shot back.

"You...you called me 'captain!'" Luffy blinked, stunned for a moment. Finally he grinned as wide as he could and gave her a nod. "Go show him who is the bigger genius, Peridot! Kick his ass!"

"Gladly!" Peridot forced her robot armor to roll at her opponent and whipped back its arms. "**Peridactyl Power Punch!**"

Ratchet grabbed the punch in midair with his larger machine. He picked the Gem up to his level to mock her, but was shocked to see Peridot stick her tongue out at him. "Nyehehehe! Made you look!"

From the spherical bottom of the Peribot, a large fist shot out and decked Ratchet directly in the face, breaking his glasses. The force of the punch forced Ratchet to let Peridot go and stumbled back. Bouncing forward from the floor, Peridot raised the mecha's hands together and had the hands grab each other. With the flick of a switch, the main body began to twirl around incredibly fast, causing the hands to blur together when looked at from afar. The momentum of her movement and the speeds the Peribot was twirling allowed Peridot to jump directly through the main body of Ratchet's machine and right through to the other side.

"Tri-Tri-Triangle Twirling Tirade...ugh!" Peridot dizzily stumbled to collect herself. "I think I'm going...going to be sick!"

"YOSH! PERIDOT! YOU DID IT! YOU BEAT SKINNY-GLASSES!" Luffy began to praise Peridot, causing the mecha-Gem to blush.

"Wow...thanks!" Peridot stabilized herself enough to grin. "See, human? My mecha beat your mecha! That means I am a genius and you...where did that clod go?!"

Sure enough, Ratchet had fled from the remains of his first armor design and could be seen jumping down from the top of the castle with a parachute attached to his back. "You think my genius is limited to just ONE machine?! Simpleton, I will show you one of the greatest devices that has ever graced my brain!"

Peridot and Luffy watched as Ratchet ran straight toward the sea, much to their bewilderment. Noticing that they probably had a moment before Ratchet reappeared with his newest weapon, Luffy turned to Peridot and patted the armor. "This is so amazing, Peridot! I didn't know you were so inventive!"

"I am many things, captain. You couldn't begin to imagine half of them. But yes, I am inventive...if you like inventiveness?" Peridot asked, dropping her proud image for a moment. It was clear that she was hoping to earn Luffy's approval for her actions.

"I do! I can't have a ship without an inventor! I don't know what is going to end up happening with all of you Gems, but I want you to be my inventor when you are here!" Luffy extended his hand. "What

do you say?"

"Inventor...me?" Peridot looked like she would burst into tears. Before she could do that, the sea began to rumble and from a small dock on the side of the island came a mighty ship/robot hybrid with Ratchet at the controls. It had another large drill on its front with two cannons on each side and weaponized arms.

From the cockpit of the mecha, Ratchet began to laugh once more. "Gentleman and green thing, behold! This is my Iron Man Mark 32 armor. Tremble at its ability to kill you on both sea and air!"

The machine then tried to walk onto the sandy beach below where Peridot and Luffy realized its major flaw: it could barely move. As such, Luffy summed it up in a single word: "Lame!"

"What were you even thinking? Is this one of those joke things?" Peridot yelled down.

"NO! THIS IS UNFINISHED, TRUE, BUT IT IS RUDE TO LAUGH AT ANOTHER PERSON'S WORK!" Ratchet freaked out. Finally, he sighed and gave up. "Whatever, I'll just skip this little farce and bring out the heavy artillery!"

Jumping out of the mecha and letting it fall into the sea, Ratchet ran down into an exposed section of his castle and disappeared from view. Luffy and Peridot jumped down from the side, Peridot screaming all the way, until they landed on the ground below. Figuring out where exactly Ratchet escaped to, the two of them made their way into a hanger bay that was completely black and dark.

"Hey! Skinny-Glasses, come out! Just give up and we won't hurt you! We just want you to let the turtle go!" Luffy called in the room.

"Never! I WILL achieve my dreams! I refuse to let two punks stop me! I don't care how high your bounty is! I will surpass you both in every conceivable way!" Ratchet yelled from the dark. From inside the darkness, two red lights appeared as the largest mechanical machine yet forced its way out from beneath the castle. It vaguely looked like a turtle with large cannons on its shell and multiple arms

with drills and claws for hands. Ratchet himself was piloting the machine from the top of its head. Its size was enormous, making Peridot's mecha look Lilliputian by comparison. "Can't you see how much larger I am than you?! You are going to die here!"

The giant machine started to lurch forward toward the two. Peridot started to cower in dread while Luffy just stood his ground. The captain gave Peridot a quick nudge and flashed her a smile. "Hey. We've got this. Straw Hats?"

Peridot's eyes widened with awe and returned the smile. "Yes. Yes, you are right. I shall stand my ground by your side!"

"That's the spirit!"

However, their fears were for nothing as the machine immediately revealed its weakness to the pair: it was still plugged in to the interior of the castle by a series of wires. Ratchet, realizing that the two of them were literally standing out of reach from his opponents, screamed angrily. "NO! I REFUSE TO ACCEPT DEFEAT JUST BECAUSE OF AN UNFINISHED DESIGN! JUST DIE AND LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Ratchet forced his mecha forward beyond its breaking point, snapping the cables powering it in the process, and slammed his fists towards both Peridot and Luffy. Peridot, pushing buttons, moved out of the way just in time. However, her attention was distracted by Luffy. The pirate captain did not move at all and stood his ground. From Peridot's perspective, he was crushed flat by the giant robot. The Gem began to scream and furiously press buttons. "NO! NOT AFTER I WAS FINALLY ACCEPTED! I SHALL AVENGE YOU!"

Just as Peridot was about to launch a counterattack at Ratchet, something happened that took her proverbial breath away. The fist that crushed Luffy was slowly pushed up from the ground up. Peridot witnessed the form of Luffy pushing back his attacker with all of his might, much to the shock of both the Gem and their adversary. "Wha...he's alive!"

"WHAT?! THAT'S NOT LOGICAL! YOU WERE DEFEATED BY MY

GENIUS!" Ratchet truly started to panic and forced his robot to push down even harder on the rubber man.

Before Peridot could make a retort about logic on the Grand Line, she watched a most amazing sight: reacting to the extra pressure put upon him, Luffy's legs began to seemingly spring down before pumping back out again. The extra energy brought about by the pumping caused Luffy's body to tighten his muscles while emitting steam and even turning a slight shade of pink. Peridot had no idea what she was witnessing, but knew that it had to be special.

Using amazing strength, Luffy pushed back the mechanical arm and stretched his own hands back as far as they could. **"GUM GUM BAZOOKA!"**

The arms hurled themselves back forward as hard as they could. Striking Ratchet's mecha with both of his palms, the force of the attack was enough to throw the machine back into the castle with little effort. Trying to catch his breath after watching Ratchet fly away, Luffy stared down at his hands and looked at his arms. "What...what just happened?"

"That's what I want to know! Your skin just changed color and I believe that your human perspiration was heated up like the steam in Steven's soup! You must tell me everything that you just did!" Peridot exclaimed excitedly, opening a hatch on her machine so she could move around freely.

"I...I won?" Luffy said, clearly confused by the entire situation.

"THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT AND YOU KNOW IT!" Peridot wailed.

At that moment, several figures made their way out of the building. Smiling widely, Luffy and Peridot watched as all of their companions moved toward them. The only three people that seemed to be missing were Chopper (who was running toward them from the other side of the castle), Sanji, and Nami. Surprisingly, they were joined by Ratchet's larger body guard, who was clearly in shock about the damage caused to the castle. After closer inspection, Petrea was carrying the knocked out form of the other body guard as well, but

the one called Honki seemed to be given freedom to move about.

"Hey! You guys are all okay!" Luffy called to them.

"WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO TO LORD RATCHET?!" General Honki cried out.

"He won. Do you want to join him?" Zoro asked. The larger man shook his head and kept quiet.

"What the hell is that thing?" Damian asked, pointing to the Peribot. "Another one of that idiot's failed inventions?"

"That would be my amazing invention, you fool!" Peridot hissed. "I engaged in direct combat with the foolish human and proved my superiority in the field of robotics!"

"YOU did that?" Usopp pointed to the wreckage caused by Luffy's attack. "Holy crap!"

"No...that was him," Peridot pointed to Luffy. "I fought him first though! Not bad for the Straw Hat's inventor, eh?"

"INVENTOR?! OY! I'M THE SHIP'S INVENTOR!" Usopp began to shout. "WHAT THE HELL?!"

"I thought you were the ship's liar," Peridot crossed her arms. "If I am wrong, then what are you for? What role do you play?"

"I'M THE SNIPER! I SHOOT THE CANNONS WITH PERFECT PRECISION!"

"Oh. So that means the position of inventor is open then. I'm glad we came to a mutual understanding about that."

"WE DIDN'T COME TO ANY UNDERSTANDING! I AM THE SNIPER! SNIPER!"

As Usopp and Peridot exchanged verbal blows at one another and the Straw Hats conferred among one another about their experiences, Chopper finally made it to them with interesting news. "Guys, we need to free Shimagame now! She is being forced near

that small island in the distance and can't stop! She wants to be free so she can lay her eggs!"

"Lay her eggs? So our island is pregnant? It makes perfect sense," Genevieve shrugged. "Still...we may have a little problem with that."

"What do you mean?" Chopper asked.

"We made it up to the control room before and decided to play around with everything we could find..."

"And by 'playing around' she means that Garnet smashed everything to pieces," Greg pointed out.

"It was therapeutic," Garnet admitted.

"The problem is that it did nothing. Our island host is still moving forward and we have no idea how to stop it. Any ideas?" Genevieve asked everyone.

After a moment's silence, Pearl looked up at the castle and down to the turtle's visible body. Her eyes narrowed before narrowing her eyes. "If the castle itself is destroyed, that should stop the forward movement and free her..."

"Good idea! Let's go get the old lady and the butler out of the castle before we bring it down!" Luffy made his way toward the giant hole in the castle and came across a disturbing sight: Roba was literally spanking the defeated Ratchet while scolding him. Luffy chose to not acknowledge the oddity and kept his focus on the mission at hand. "Hey! I'm sorry that we need to do this, but we are going to destroy your castle now!"

"What?!" Ratchet weakly asked. "My castle?!"

"Hush, you! You deserve it after the stunt you just pulled!" Roba scolded him. "Come on, Gonzou! Let's get out of here!"

"Yes, ma'am!" the butler replied as they all hurried out to freedom.

"So how are we gonna bring down the castle without hurting Shimagame?" Steven asked, taking a moment away from admitting

Peridot's robot to acknowledge his friends. "After everything she has gone through, she doesn't deserve it!"

"Agreed, Steven. That is why we need a much larger, delicate touch," Pearl smiled. "Are all of you in agreement with what I propose to do?"

"Yup!" Amethyst grinned. "Let's mash it up!"

"Ready when you are," Garnet started to snap her fingers to a beat. "Greg, play us a song."

"Why? What are you...oh. OH! Yeah! No problem! I call this little number 'Collaboration!'" Greg cracked his knuckles and began to bring to life a stirring blend of pianos and drum machines, all keeping to Garnet's rhythm. Before all of their eyes, they witnessed the Crystal Gems fusing together as one, giant being nearly the size of the castle. She had bright-magenta skin, six arms, a dark-indigo visor, and long mint green hair.

Needless to say, everyone was simultaneously terrified and impressed.

"WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?!" Ratchet managed to get out before getting slapped by his mother again.

"Alexandrite!" Steven shouted with joy. "I haven't seen you since that dinner with Connie's family!"

"Al-Alexandrite?" the Straw Hats repeated.

"She is terrifying," Genevieve whispered. "I love it."

Without saying a word, Alexandrite went straight to work. She gripped the bottom of the castle and pulled it up off of the turtle's back. With every second of pulling, the various cables and robes that bound Shimagame began to snap. The discarded pieces fell into the ocean and with little effort at all, the turtle was freed and the castle tossed into the bottom of the ocean. The sight of his life's work getting destroyed caused Ratchet to finally collapse from a combination of his injuries and shock.

"Hmm...that's a wrap," Alexandrite grunted in a low, throaty voice. Just as soon as she appeared, she separated back into the individual components that made up her fusion. The three Crystal Gems reappeared and gave each other happy looks.

"We did it!" Pearl cheered. "We saved the island and finished our quest!"

"Woohoo! Yeah we did!" Amethyst started dancing and shouting.

"Nice job, everybody! You all did wonderful!" Garnet told the entire crew.

"But what about Shimagame?" Steven asked again. "Is she hurt? Is she okay?"

A cry emanated from the island and Chopper listened intently. Finally, he nodded and turned to Steven. "She is happy to be free and doesn't blame anyone for what happened to her. She is just grateful to have been woken up in time to lay her eggs."

Steven smiled, clearly relieved that the animal was okay. He patted the ground and looked to Shimagame's large head. "Good girl. I guess it's time to go?"

"That's the plan! Are you going to be okay, old lady?" Luffy directed his question to Roba.

"We will rebuild. Once Shimagame lays her eggs, I am sure she will settle back for a long sleep. As for my idiot son, he and his friends will do right by our island...right?!" Roba barked at her son, who was still passed out. When he did not reply, her gaze directed toward Honki, who nervously nodded his head.

"Yes...yes, ma'am!" Honki saluted.

"Good boy."

With that, he turned around and bowed to Steven. "Thank you...you didn't have to do that. I promise that I won't forget it!"

Steven could only blush in response.

From the shore of the sea, the familiar form of the Going Merry approached the ship. It was still damaged from the earlier bombardment, but it was still strong enough to continue its quest to at least one more main island. On board, the crew could see Nami and Sanji wave at them. As the crew made their way back to the ship, Steven looked back to the former place where the castle once was and sighed. "Thank you, Straw Hats. Your quest is over. The Grand Line presents you with a new quest."

GWMAPT

As the Going Merry sailed away, the Straw Hats were able to watch the miraculous sight of Shimagame laying her eggs on the sandy surface close to the nearby island. They watched in awe as the eggs began to hatch, revealing miniature giant turtles. Steven, being who he was, began to name them as they entered the world.

"And that one is named Shelly and that one is Cecil and that one is..."

"Take a breath there, Schtoo-Ball," Greg patted his son on the shoulder. "They will still be there in a few minutes."

"But if I don't name them, who will?"

"I'm sure Shimagame is more than happy to name her own children," Greg sat down and stretched. "For now, I think we should all just relax! We saved that kid from hurting himself and get to witness one of life's greatest gifts. I'd call that a win, wouldn't you?"

"Win?! How can we call it a win if we didn't get any treasure at all?!" Nami bemoaned from her nearby tangerine grove.

"Come on! We helped those people and the turtle! Can't you see beyond not getting paid for it?" Greg countered.

"Just because you don't care about money doesn't mean that the rest of us shouldn't!"

"You have an entire room filled with solid gold treasure! Why do you need any more?" Greg pointed out.

Before Nami could break into a long tirade about the value of money, she was interrupted by Luffy jumping up and down. "GUYS! I FOUND IT! I FOUND THE GOLDEN CROWN!"

"What is that idiot yelling about now?" Nami groaned. She walked to the side of the railing and looked at her captain. He was pointing down at the baby turtles crawling away from their discarded eggshells. "Where is the treasure? I don't see anything but turtles!"

"That IS the treasure! Look at the eggs!" Luffy pointed even harder.

Trying to get a better view, Greg and Steven looked out and stared intently at the turtles until the two of them simultaneously noticed the sun shining off of the eggshells. "Are...are those eggs...?" Greg stammered.

"THEY ARE SOLID GOLD!" Steven shouted. "THE CRACKED EGGSHELLS ARE THE GOLDEN CROWN!"

"I should have known it wouldn't be a literal crown!" Pearl joined them, grinning excitedly. "Fantastic! I feel so fulfilled!"

"That crown is mine!" Nami instantly jumped down to the deck. "We deserve one of the eggshells as our payment for services rendered! We all know it!"

Turning the ship around, the Going Merry docked itself by one of the eggs and realized the inherent problem with collecting their reward. "This egg is gigantic! We can't fit it on the ship!" Pearl freaked out. "The size and weight alone is enough to sink our vessel!"

Nami started to pace around in a circle while muttering to herself. "Hmm...okay. We can tie the eggshell to the ship and drag it along to the next island..."

"That doesn't sound very smart," Peridot pointed out. "The ship can barely handle the excessive damage done to it during the fighting...I think that we should just leave it be..."

"NEVER!"

"Steven has an idea!" Steven waved his hand. "Connie, can you get

me your bag?"

"My...oh! My bag!" Connie ran into the women's quarters and quickly returned with the bag that she brought with her to the Grand Line. "Here you go, Steven!"

"I fail to see how that small carrying device can fit something that large," Peridot commented.

"It's a magic bag given to me by...well, it's a long story. The point is that it is larger on the inside than on the outside! How it works, I really don't know, but it does!" Connie started removing several objects from it, mainly medical in function. "I really don't want to damage any of my mom's stuff..."

"...I...I have no adequate response for what I am seeing," Peridot blinked and shook her head.

"An appropriate response involving anything with that terrible man," Pearl whispered. "It is better not to think about it."

"Ah. Just like everything else on this journey."

Steven handed the bag to Garnet, who nodded, and watched as she moved to the discarded remnants of a turtle's eggshell. She picked up the solid gold shell and tried stuffing it into the bag. When it would not fit, she broke the "crown" into pieces small enough to fit into the opening of the bag. After stuffing it full of gold, she hoisted the bag up and returned to the ship. "I'd watch out if I were you...this is a bit heavy. I don't think this bag was meant to carry this much weight."

"Allow me," Petrea walked forward and motioned to let her hold it. She closed her eyes for a moment and finally took the bag. She draped it on her shoulder and smiled. "Light as a feather!"

"Well, we have a giant eggshell made of gold hidden in a shitty bag that somehow fit the damn thing in it. What the hell do we do with it?" Sanji asked as he lit a cigarette. "Between this and all of the Skypeian treasure, we probably have more than enough to fix Merry. I think we should be smart with this..."

"Leave the money to me! Everything left over is mine!" Nami immediately went to grab the bag from Petrea who lifted it above her heads

"Hey! I happen to agree with Sanji! There are things that we as a crew could use...and things that would definitely help my shop back in Beach City!" Petrea told her.

"What right do you have to talk about our finances?!"

"Hmm...I don't recall seeing you fighting any of Ratchet's men," Petrea gave her a sly grin. "I think the decision should fall to Luffy and Peridot."

"Hey! I fought too!" Damian pouted.

"Taking a blast isn't fighting," Zoro chimed in. "If anything, Steven did more than either of us on that front."

"There! It is settled!" Petrea folded her arms in satisfaction. "Straw Hat, do you care what we do with the extra gold?"

"Can we get food?" Luffy asked.

"I can get special ingredients to make you any dessert you want," Petrea told him in singsong voice.

"Even chocolate meat?!" Luffy asked eagerly.

"I...sure!" Petrea fought hard against gagging. "If that's what you want, then that is what you will get!"

"YAY! I vote that we do what she wants!"

"LUFFY! HOW DARE YOU?!" Nami scolded him.

"But...but...chocolate meat!"

The navigator shot a look at the chocolatier. "That was low and you know it."

"Kyahahaha! Guilty as charged," Petrea chuckled. "What about you,

Peridot the inventor?"

"Me? I...I will request that we do what is the best course of action for our group!" Peridot suggested.

"Which is my plan," Petrea nodded. "It's unanimous."

"Well, what kind of supplies would we need? And how the hell would one go about selling something like this? It's a giant freaking eggshell!" Usopp pointed out. "We don't just have someone who we could just call to take the golden pieces away!"

As the Straw Hats thought about their situation, Steven raised his hand. "But what if we do?"

"Steven?" Pearl asked.

"What about that funny Phil guy? Maybe he knows people? He told us we could call him if we were in a pinch...maybe now is a good time?"

"No. No. No. No," Genevieve quickly shook her head. "No way. I hate that guy! That is a terrible idea!"

"But it's worth a shot!" Steven pleaded. "Come on, guys!"

A few moments later, the crew stared at the Den Den Mushi the former Mr. 6 gave them a few days prior. Nobody wanted to pick up the receiver. Finally, it was Steven who went for it and picked it up. After a few moments, a hostile voice answers from the other side. "Who is this?! How did you get this line?!"

"Phil, it's me! It's Steven...from the Davy Back Fight?" Steven cheerfully tried to remind him.

There was silence on the other side before laughter filled the air. "The kid? Damn, you got into trouble already? It hasn't even been a week since I left. Don't tell me you miss me!"

"Of course I do...but that's not why I called. I don't really know whom else to turn to...but say we have a giant, golden eggshell stored in a magical bag that we don't know what to do with. What do you think

is a good idea to sell it?" Steven asked.

"...what? I...okay, let's ignore how stupid that sounds and focus on your request. What you need is someone to broker your...ugh, I feel stupid for saying this...your 'eggshell' to a buyer, presumably of shady origin. Am I wrong?"

"Nope!"

"And it is made of solid gold?"

"Yup!"

"Hmm...I've never been an underworld broker before...sounds like fun. Alright, I'll make some calls and see what I can do. Can you move that...thing?" Phil sighed while he asked.

"Petrea can use her powers...but it will be really heavy and huge if we take it out of the bag," Steven explained.

"Blondie? Hmm...I can work with this. Alright. There is an auction house of ill-repute on Backslide Island. Goldilocks and Blondie should know it. That ain't too far from where I am. Where the hell is your plucky band sailing from?"

Nami ran to her quarters and examined a map. She returned back roughly five minutes later. "We are apparently near Telemachus Island."

"Really? That's not that far from the damn archipelago we left from! Whatever. Here is what I want you to do: have Goldilocks and her two bears take the sea train from Shift Station to Backslide. It's not a far ride...I'll meet you there. I am sure we can sell this thing if it as huge as you guys are making it out to be. Sound like a plan?"

Steven turned to Petrea, Genevieve, and Damian. "You...you guys would have to leave?"

"It makes sense," Damian tapped the side of his face. "We actually have experience dealing with the kind of people who frequent these things. Crocodile sent us to Backslide many times to get illegal weapons and materials. This would actually be a good place to get

some good supplies for the ship. Hell, we can probably find things to help with that Clusterbuster thing you guys are making."

"But I don't want you to go!" Steven pleaded.

"Kid, I'm not going to steal them away," Phil spoke from the other side. "This is just purely an opening for a business venture. Once they are done, they can take the train back to...probably Water Seven based on where I'd bet your Log Pose sends you."

"How can we trust you not to screw us over?" Nami asked suspiciously.

"Hey, you called me! What the hell does that mean?!"

The navigator groaned and sighed. "Fine. I guess we will look for this 'Shift Station' on our way to the next island...does anyone have a problem with this plan?"

"I suppose we can wait for one more island before returning home...we never ended up getting additional parts for the drill..." Pearl thought about it. "And it's not like we are going to abandon Petrea and Damian here..."

"I'm up for it," Garnet added. "It could be fun."

"So nobody has any issues with this?" Nami tried to confirm it.

"I do!" Genevieve finally raised her hand.

"Come on. It will be fun. The old Baroque Works crew: back together for one final mission! Doesn't that sound exciting?" Damian poked her in the ribs.

"No. Not with him," she pointed to the Den Den Mushi.

"Look. I've got a few days open before I move on. If you decide to go, that's great. If not, then I truly don't care. Either way, good luck with whatever the hell you all are doing. If you'll excuse me, I've got crap to do," Phil told them as he hung up from his end.

The Straw Hats were quiet yet again as they processed all of this.

"Are we really doing this?" Nami asked again. "This is me being serious. For the last time, does anyone have a problem with splitting up the group for this mission?"

All eyes turned on Genevieve, who sighed and lowered her head in defeat. "Fine...but I'm buying more paint and canvas supplies. I'm tired of Amethyst eating them."

As the Straw Hats laughed at the joke (which wasn't a joke), Steven looked on nervously. The youth was nervous about breaking the crew up, even for something small like this. 'What if they don't come back? If one person ends up leaving, what is to stop someone else from doing so?' Finally, Steven shook his head and discarded his worries away. Now was not the time to worry about stuff like that. They had finally solved the mystery of the Golden Crown and we're going to see a new island.

What could go wrong?

GWMAPT

Aokiji was bored.

That was not uncommon for the man. He regularly had to deal with situations and scenarios that he honestly could care less about. While he had a better temperament than his fellow two admirals, sometimes Fleet Admiral Sengoku would prefer that he had an attitude similar to that of Akainu's. Akainu was a man who followed Absolute Justice, which was far more extreme than the way Aokiji viewed the world. He considered himself far fairer in that regard.

But the matter he needed to discuss today was different. The matter at hand was important...not just to him, but to the entire world.

He was listening to a man prattle on about the craftsmanship behind Aokiji's personal bike. While he enjoyed his transport plenty, Aokiji was a man of little needs. He carried only what was required of him, and there was little that his job asked him to hold on his person. The most important thing he held was a Golden Den Den Mushi, but that was something he never wanted to touch or utilize in his lifetime. It had too much power.

"And the wheels! I have no idea how they manage to keep going on the ice!" the man praised him. He was pale and thin with wavy lavender hair. His beady eyes and red nose were hidden behind a brown, leather mask. "Vegapunk can really work wonders, can't he? I heard about that new project of his. Crazy, isn't it? I don't know if he will succeed with those swords, but I wouldn't put it past him!"

"Yeah...I really don't care about any of this," Aokiji finally admitted. "Sorry to burst your bubble, Spandam."

Spandam merely blinked and then coughed. Aokiji noticed his hand moving away from his bike rather quickly into his pocket, but didn't care enough to pursue the matter further. "Oh...well, then...I must admit that I am confused. Why would you come all the way to Enies Lobby? What could be so damn important that you felt the need to talk in person?!"

"Nothing much...only Nico Robin," Aokiji shrugged.

"Oh, is that all?" Spandam nodded. After a second, he nearly fell backwards in shock. "WAIT, WHAT?! THE ETERNALLY WANTED CRIMINAL?!"

"The same. Based on her current trajectory, she should be arriving in Water Seven before the week is out," Aokiji stated.

Spandam started to grin uncontrollably at the news. "Oh, this is perfect! Nico Robin and the plans of the Pluton all in one place! What could possibly make this day any better?"

"Perhaps this might: she is traveling with the Straw Hat pirates. Not only can I confirm that the one known as 'Tiger Millionaire' is with them, but there are three skilled ladies who call themselves 'Crystal Gems.' There was a fourth, but I might have killed her. I don't really know or care."

Spandam fell back on the floor and started laughing uncontrollably. "Gems? GEMS! This is it! This is going to make my career! We will intercept them and...no. No, I can't be hasty. Doing so would ruin the Pluton mission and would cause us to lose the element of surprise. No...this needs to be played properly."

"If you say so. I told you what I wanted to tell you. I may stay nearby...or I may not. Either way, I'm leaving," Aokiji raised his hand and gave a small wave. He picked up his bike and noticed that there seemed to be something missing from it. "Hmm...say, did I drop my sleeping mask anywhere? I thought I left it in the bike."

"This is too important for just my main operatives! I'll bring the recruits in as well! I will spare no expense to bring the Gorosei their prized...I'm sorry? What did you ask?" Spandam was cackling like a madman to himself before he picked up that Aokiji was talking to him.

"Forget it. If you see anything that belongs to me, hold onto it for me. I'll get it whenever. Good luck with your mission," Aokiji started to leave but stopped and turned around. "Let me just say this: don't underestimate them. There is something different about that group...something off. They shouldn't be taken lightly."

"Oh, don't worry. I am sure CP9 will manage just fine against some insignificant pirates. It doesn't matter if they have the Gems of myth or the Devil Child of Ohara in their group, we will crush them just the same...I give you my word."

The Three Syllables

"Are you sure you have packed enough?! One can never have too many pairs of socks on a long journey!" Steven pleaded to Genevieve in the ladies' quarters.

After one final night of rest, the Going Merry had nearly reached its destination: Shift Station. As such, it was nearing time for the former Miss Goldenweek and the "Mr. 5 Pair" to catch a sea train. While Petrea and Damian had already packed a light bag of clothes for the journey, Steven and Connie were helping Genevieve do the same. No matter how far the young painter had come, she was a procrastinator at heart.

"Steven, you do realize I am only going to be away for a night or two at most...right?" Genevieve sighed as she held up two different pairs of socks. "I think the five pairs of socks you packed will be enough. Connie, can you talk some sense into him?"

"I'm with Genevieve," Connie nodded. "I think she will be fine, Steven."

"...fine...but did we pack enough shirts for you?"

"Steven!" the two girls snapped in unison, causing the youth to immediately silence himself.

"Aren't you nervous at all?" Connie asked, passing over a container of paints. "This sounds like you are going to be seeing some rough people."

"It's nothing I'm not used to," the girl shrugged. "I like to think that I'm merely putting on an old disguise one last time."

"So, you might say that you are slapping a new coat of paint on yourself?" Steven raised his eyebrows up and down. "Eh? Eh?"

The girls turned to each other and sighed. "That was so forced that it hurt," Genevieve dryly commented.

"The pain! The pain of the pun!" Connie faked getting stabbed in the chest. "Don't cry for me! I'm already dead!"

"Oh no. She is dead. See what your terrible puns have done to this poor girl? For shame," Genevieve knelt by Connie's still body.

"I...I couldn't have!" Steven wailed. He raised his fists in the air and began to shake them. "Nooooooooo!"

There was silence for a moment. Slowly, Connie started to snigger at the absurdity. It grew to laughter that Genevieve and Steven joined in on. After a short while, the three tried catching their breath. They found it was harder than usual to do so.

"I'm gonna miss you, Genevieve," Steven finally got out. "I'm gonna see you again before I have to go home...right?"

"I don't see why not," the painter smirked. "I mean; it is only going to be a few days. What could possibly happen?"

GWMAPT

"Would anyone care to try this wonderful dish? I call it potato paille! I made it with love for you all!" Sanji announced to the ship.

The chef cheerily offered his dish to the various ladies on the ship, including a disgusted Pearl. Finally, he reached Nami, who grabbed the fork sticking out of the plate and took a bite. "Hey...this is delicious! Great job, Sanji!"

"I CAN DIE A HAPPY MAN! THIS IS THE GREATEST DAY OF MY LIFE!" Sanji laughed at the top of his lungs. "NOTHING CAN BRING ME DOWN NOW!"

"Could I try some? I'm famished!" Greg asked, grasping his stomach.

"There's bread in the kitchen," Sanji pointed toward it, barely acknowledging the man. "You can make a sandwich. HEY! PETREA-CHAN! TRY MY POTATO PAILLE BEFORE YOU GO!"

He ran toward the chocolatier, leaving poor Greg in the dust. "...why

do I always get overlooked?"

"Don't sweat it, man," Damian patted his back, dropping his small travel bag beside him. "I still think you're pretty great."

"You're just saying that because I've been letting you stay at the beach house and helping you get groceries for the past month!" Greg smiled.

"I contribute when I can! Hell, maybe we can convert some of this gold into cash? Isn't gold valuable in your...err...our dimension?" Damian suggested.

"Yeah, but I don't mind. Let the treasure stay here. Grand Line treasure is meant for the Grand Line. The journey is more reward than anything. These guys need whatever help they can get...I'm rich in other ways."

"That...that's beautiful! You're the best, Greg!" Damian wiped tears away from his eyes.

"Hardly. I'm just...just..." Greg started to stammer before pointing out into the ocean. "Uh...what the hay is that?!"

Following Greg's directions, Damian looked out and saw a peculiar sight: a giant frog with scars on its body swimming away into the ocean. The bomb-man tried to make sense of the creature before he was knocked away by a most-excitable Luffy. "Hey! What's that frog doing?! How is it swimming like that?! Guys! Come look at this frog freestyle swimming!"

"Luffy, frogs don't swim like that..." Usopp walked over, starting to berate his captain before seeing the strange amphibian as well. "WHAT THE HELL?!"

"One side! Move! Jeez, this ship is not big enough for all of these people..." Amethyst muttered, joining the large crowd staring at the creature. When she finally got a good glimpse of it, her eyes widened. "Woah! Are you guys thinking of what I'm thinking?"

"Oh yeah! Who is up for barbeque?" Luffy cheered, whipping his head around. "FOLLOW THAT MEAT!"

"Aye-aye, captain!" Amethyst rubbed her hands together and prepared to help turn the sail.

"If you clowns even THINK of touching that sail, I will make you regret it!" Nami cracked her knuckles in anger. "Do you guys even realize where it is going? Look closer, you morons!"

Nami pointed out to a small object even further in the distance. It appeared to be a lighthouse and a small building near it. Why it was there, most of the Straw Hats did not know, but they were curious about a floating archway seemingly in the middle of the ocean by it. A large, dark object was underneath it, but they were too far away to make out any of its details. "A lighthouse? What is so important about one of those things?" Amethyst asked.

"Based on where that Phil guy was talking about, this would be roughly where that sea train station is. Our Log Pose might still be pointing west, but I'd bet my tangerines that this is Shift Station. It makes sense that it wouldn't be picked up by it," Nami explained. "Though I am interested in just how a sea train works."

"You know, I never thought about that. The work that must have been put into it...I'd love to know just how they did it," Pearl looked down into the water. "Does the machine float on the water or are there tracks that I cannot see..."

"I just want to know about the frog," Amethyst shrugged.

Suddenly, the black shape in the distance began to move toward the Going Merry. As it was doing so, the frog began to pick up speed in its stroke. Before anyone could truly respond to it, the frog found itself crashing directly in front of the giant shape. Now that it was close enough to make out, the Straw Hats realized that Nami was right: the shape was a train that could float on the sea.

"THE FROG GOT HIT!" Chopper screamed.

"Woah!" Amethyst let out a low whistle. "Okay. NOW I'm interested in the train thing."

Quickly, the door to the ladies' quarters opened up and the three

youngest human members of the crew made their way out, looking around wildly. "What was that sound?! Did we miss the train?!" Connie asked.

"Did we miss THE train? I have no idea. But that was A train," Damian observed. "I guess we need to dock, don't we?"

"Seems like it," Nami nodded. "Get your gear together, you three. It seems like this is your stop."

A few moments later, the Going Merry found itself docked next to the small station. To their surprise, they were met by a small girl with green hair and a rabbit. She looked at them and shouted into the small house. "GRANNY! PIRATES ARE HERE TO ROB US!"

"HEY!" the Straw Hats shouted in unison.

"We are going to rob them?!" Steven worried. "I thought we were just looking for a train!"

"We aren't robbing them, Steven," Pearl sighed. "The small child has clearly jumped to an outlandish conclusion. We need to clear this up before they attempt an altercation..."

"R-Robbers?!" a voice from the small house called out in a slurred voice. "Not o-on my watch!"

The pirates braced themselves for the inevitable fight that was about to occur. What they were not prepared for was an elderly woman in a train conductor's uniform stumbling out of the house clutching a bottle. She looked around and then scratched her head. "Hey, Chimney...I forgot...why you did call me again?"

"SHE'S PISS DRUNK!" Zoro and Usopp shouted in unison, seemingly offended.

GWMAPT

"Hey! This potato dish is pretty damn good. The rum brings out some good flavors..." the elderly woman laughed.

After a short explanation from Pearl on just who the Straw Hats were

and why they were not there to rob the sea train, the lady (whose name turned out to be Korkoro) and her granddaughter instantly warmed up to the crew. They apologized for their hasty behavior and sat down for a quick bite to eat while they waited for the next sea train to arrive.

"I hope you forgive us for thinking you were robbing Puffing Tom. We aren't used to many pirates around here!" Chimney (the granddaughter) bowed her head.

"I'm confused," Peridot spoke up. "I thought you confused us with individuals who would purloin from your aquatic transportation units? What do you mean by a 'Puffing Tom?'"

"I thought what now?" Chimney cocked her head in confusion.

"That's nerdspeak for 'train robbers,'" Amethyst elaborated.

"Amethyst! Rude!" Steven scolded her.

"Oh! You don't know Puffing Tom? That is the name of the sea train! It's a steam-powered engine that goes along the tracks down there!" Chimney told the large crowd. "Look in the water! You can see the tracks right below the surface!"

It was true. It appeared that the tracks were merely floating in the water. Peridot knelt down and began to poke it. "How...how is this possible?! This track is capable of housing the weight of that giant...'Puffing Tom?'"

"Yup! Pretty neat, isn't it?"

Peridot's eyes widened as she continued to study the track. "I must know the secrets you possess!"

"Eh, I wouldn't think too hard about it. The man who devised this? He's long-gone," Kokoro pointed out as she took a swig. "He took a lot of his secrets with him..."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Pearl bowed. "He must have been quite extraordinary to come up with something like this."

"What about the frog?" Usopp asked, pointing back out to the sea.
"What's his deal?"

"You mean Yokozuna? He's such a pest! Every day he tries to fight the train to make himself stronger. It won't kill him, but he's got enough scars to show it!" Chimney frowned. "He keeps damaging the train and scaring our customers!"

"He's a fellow warrior of the sea, eh?" Usopp nodded. "I can't help but respect him for that."

"Me too! Crew, we are NOT going to try to eat the frog!" Luffy decreed.

"YOU WERE GOING TO EAT IT?!" Steven looked appalled at the notion.

"Not that this isn't a lovely conversation, but weren't you kids saying something about trying to get a train? Puffing Tom won't be back for quite a bit, but it's not too long of a wait. Where are you heading?" Kokoro asked.

"We are interested in purchasing three tickets for Backslide Island," Petrea spoke up. "How long do you think the trip would take?"

"Backslide, eh? Well...the first stop would be St. Poplar, but Backslide is home to Pucci. It's known as 'The City of Cuisine.' Taking into account the time it will take Puffing Tom to get back here and discounting the time the World Government's train will take...I'd say about six hours of total wait time."

"SIX HOURS?! WHAT THE HELL ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO FOR SIX HOURS?!" Damian freaked out. "THAT'S BULLSHIT!"

"Hey, you are the ones who missed the train," Kokoro shrugged. "Don't blame me for that. Now...if three of you are going to Backslide, where are the rest of you heading off to?"

"I dunno...if Backslide Island has a cuisine city, I think we should head there!" Luffy raised his fist.

"Captain, might I remind you that we do not have time to go explore

a city centered around food," Pearl folded her arms. "As fun as all of this has been, we really need to get back to the barn so we can save the Earth from the Cluster. Leaving the ship here (with the Steven Badge attached to the hull) is counterproductive to this. What if somebody were to attempt to steal the ship? Our planet would be doomed!"

"To be fair, we run the risk of anyone trying to steal the ship anywhere we go," Nami frowned. "But Pearl has a point. We are not taking a train! We need to finish following the Log Pose to...I think Phil said it was called 'Water Seven.'"

"Ah, then you are in for a treat! Water Seven is called 'The City of Water' and is full of beautiful sights, great food, and is home to the best shipwrights in the world," Kokoro explained to them. "Just looking at your ship shows you could use a good patch job."

"I agree! Let's go to Water Seven and make a shipwright our nakama!" Luffy shouted happily.

"Here. Take this map," Kokoro scribbled something down on a piece of paper. "Talk to a gentleman named Iceburg. He'll point you in the right direction to the best shipwrights there...consider it a letter of recommendation."

"Thank you!" Nami accepted it graciously.

"You guys will have to wait around roughly seven days for the Log Pose to register Water Seven, so you all have plenty of time to wait for these three, explore, and stop whatever the hell a 'Cluster' is," Kokoro told them.

"A week? We can't wait another week!" Pearl said frantically.

"Yeah...I just realized that my mom is not going to be too happy with me being gone for so long. I don't think we are going to be able to stay that long..." Connie looked down.

"If you guys need to head back early, then you head back early," Zoro told them. "At this point, the only thing you'd be waiting on are these idiots to get back. Nothing is forcing you to stay here after that

happens. We managed well before and we will be okay now."

"HEY!" Damian growled.

"Look, you guys don't need to wait around for us to board the train" Petrea told the crew. "We will be fine here. Zoro is right. You guys are already waiting on us to do this for you all, so why don't you enjoy the time you can in Water Seven now before the Beach City crew needs to head back to the old barn? I'm sure we will get back sometime tomorrow, so that should give you guys enough time to look around and have a good time in the city."

"Are you sure you don't want us to stay with you until the train comes?" Steven asked.

"It's okay, Steven. We've done this kind of thing before. We don't need to be constantly entertained to pass the time. Isn't that right?" Petrea turned to her former partner and the young painter. She found them passed out on the ground, bored as could be. "REALLY?! THEY HAVEN'T EVEN LEFT YET! RUDE!"

She kicked both of them off of the ground, causing them to rub their heads in pain. "Ow! What the hell?!"

"Shut up and be quiet, Damian," Petrea's eyes narrowed. "Let's say our goodbyes before we hold them up any more than we already have."

"No," Genevieve groaned. "We can't."

"Really? Why can't we? Don't tell me you are backing out now," Petrea frowned.

"No. It's just...we can't say 'goodbye.' Don't you remember what he said?" Genevieve pointed to Greg. "You don't say 'goodbye.' You say 'until the next time' instead."

The chocolatier blinked in surprise before laughing softly. "Kyhahaha! So we do. Well then...until the next time we meet, you crazy pirates. Stay safe. We will be back before you know it!"

"YOU GUYS STAY SAFE TOO!" Luffy cried. He was not alone in his

shedding of tears. Most of the sentimental crewmates were at least tearing up at the departure of three of their number. Amethyst went to knock Petrea in the shoulder, but was beaten there by the young half-Gem.

"Un-Until..." Steven stammered through tears as he ran up to hug her. "Until the next time!"

"Until the next time, kid," Damian patted his head. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

With that, the Straw Hats returned to the Going Merry and waved farewell to their companions and the family of two. The second the ship sailed out of sight, Petrea sank to a bench (clutching the bag containing the eggshell) and sighed. "Well...now what?"

"Hell if I know. You should have asked them for a book or something," Kokoro shrugged as she poured back her drink. "You're gonna be here for a while."

The chocolatier blinked as she realized the gravity of her situation. "This is going to be a long six hours, isn't it?"

"You know it," Kokoro laughed.

Petrea looked over to Damian and Genevieve, who had resumed laying on the ground in a passed out state. She buried her head into her free hand and groaned. "I should have asked for a book."

GWMAPT

"What an awesome way to end my birthday celebrations...even if I have to wait for the others to get back!" Steven clapped sometime later. The boy had been feeling rather depressed after leaving the three people he knew the longest at the Shift Station. However, the others perked him up when they decided to discuss the idea of adding a shipwright to the crew. "I'm gonna have a new person to call my nakama!"

"Exactly. That's why I think you should leave the selection process to me!" Sanji pointed to himself. "I'll find the hottest shipwright available! Any gorgeous woman I find cannot refuse such a face as

mine!"

"Calm down, lover boy," Usopp hit him. "Looks are not everything. We need to find somebody competent. This is Kaya's ship...I want to do right by her."

"I agree with the liar," Pearl nodded. "Proficiency is what you should be aiming for. It is a miracle that this ship has made it this far. The amount of stress it has underwent...I can hardly believe it. It deserves the finest shipwright you can find."

"I just don't know how you can fit anyone else on this ship," Greg mused as he scratched his head. "It...it is really cramped here as it is. I know you need someone to fix the ship, but clearly size is going to be an issue. Is there any way to add an addition on the ship?"

"That...that would be hard to do..." Usopp shook his head. "I don't know if that can be done. It's okay. I'd rather give up some of my living space if it meant that Merry lives on."

"Hmm...we should really be writing this down..." Connie ran into the ladies' quarters and returned with paper. "So, what are our suggestions for the shipwright?"

"He should look like this!" Luffy grabbed the paper and scribbled a crude drawing on the front of it. "He's gonna be huge and strong and..."

"Why...why don't I take care of writing down the suggestions?" Pearl snatched the paper out of Luffy's hands and turned it over. "Now then...what are you all looking for in a new crewmate?"

As everyone thought about what they wanted to say, Steven was the first one to open his mouth. In doing so, he set the pace for how the rest of the discussion would go. "Dad, if you'd please?"

On request, Greg started to play a small tune for his son to sing. Steven, picking up on the beat, began his contribution immediately. *"If you want to be our shipwright, please be good and do your job right."*

"Keep Merry going straight and strong," Connie added to the song.

"Please do not treat her wrong!" Usopp made his voice known.

"Be a nice person and fit right in here," Chopper clapped along.

"Have a dream?" Peridot tried to be a part of it, awkwardly singing as if it was her first time.

"Let me drink beer!" Zoro snorted.

"Be the most beautiful babe of all!" Sanji's eyes turned to hearts.

"Please be five meters tall!" Luffy demanded.

"The shipwright we need is waiting right there," Pearl pointed toward a small island making itself known in the distance.

"A shipwright's a shipwright. I really don't care," Garnet shrugged.

"Let us go and find our friend," Robin smiled.

"So this song can end," Amethyst laughed and clapped.

Nami, who had not contributed to the song, merely stood there as she tried to comprehend what just happened. "There was a time where something like this would be considered weird. Now? This is nothing new."

"We got Zoro to sing!" Steven cheered. "This is great!"

"I didn't sing," Zoro pointed out. "I just said that I wanted to drink beer."

"To the beat and rhythm of the song," Steven countered.

The swordsman disregarded him and went back to the kitchen to grab himself a new drink. As he did so, he passed by Nami as she was opening up Kokoro's letter. He managed to glance down and saw that it was a crude sketch of Water Seven with a sign that said "Iceburg here." Just as he made it inside of the kitchen, he heard Nami hollering about it. "THIS IS USELESS!"

"Never a dull moment here," Zoro smirked, opening up his drink and

taking a sip. He went to return to the deck, but stopped as he found himself humming. "...damn it. I have that stupid song stuck in my head. I can't let the kid know or I'll never hear the end of it."

He returned to the deck as Nami was busy handing out money to each member of the crew. When she was finished with them, most of them joined Usopp by the patched up mast. She motioned for Zoro to come over and receive his own payment. "Listen up! This is your spending money for while you are here. If you need more, it will cost you 300% interest."

"Isn't that a bit much? Aren't you guys coming into quite a bit of money after you exchange all of that gold?" Greg asked nearby.

"If you ask me, I am being rather generous with it. Is that a problem, Greg?" Nami flashed him a deadly look, causing him to jump.

"NOPE! THAT IS FAIR! YOU ARE QUITE GENEROUS!" Greg cowered behind Garnet, who actually moved to extend her own hand out to Nami.

"Navigator Nami, I would like some of your local currency as well," Garnet requested.

Nami raised an eyebrow. "Really? You don't strike me as the kind of Gem who would want to buy anything."

"I just am looking for a newspaper...nothing more," Garnet replied.

"I...that's it? I mean...okay. Sure. Here you go," Nami handed over some extra bills. "Is there any chance that I will know WHY you need a newspaper? I've got a few in my drawer if you are curious?"

"No. I am looking for a specific newspaper. Unfortunately, you do not own it," Garnet accepted the money and nodded. "Thank you."

"Hey, Nami!" Steven tugged at the navigator's shirt, who was still trying to process what had just happened. "I...um...have a favor to ask..."

"I...uh...sure, Steven. What is it?"

"It's kind of a secret..." Steven whispered.

"A secret? What are you up to?" Nami raised an eyebrow, but nevertheless obliged Steven by moving slightly away from the crew, who were caught up in Usopp reminiscing about the multiple patch jobs he gave to the ship.

"I know that you really love your money and probably don't want to share any more than you already have...but could I please borrow some more?" the youth asked.

The navigator blinked in surprise. "You want to borrow more money, even counting the money I already gave you? You never ask to borrow money. What could you possibly need it for?"

"It's nothing really. I...uh...I just...this place is looking like the last place on the Grand Line we are going to stop at before having to go back...and when we go back, Connie is going to go back to her parents and...and I am not sure when her parents will let her come back, or even when I am going to come back and..." Steven stammered as his face turned red.

Nami raised an eyebrow. "Steven Universe, are you asking me for money to take Connie out on a date?"

"No! It's not a date!" Steven replied hastily. "I just want to take her out for a good time before we have to go back to Beach City and...and...it's a date, isn't it?"

"It certainly sounds like one to me," Nami laughed and bent down to get on his level. "Steven, there isn't anything to feel bad about. If you want to take her out, take her out. Don't get shy; own it. A girl like Connie would want you to assert yourself! Be yourself. You are Steven Universe! You love to sing, to dance, and to make people happy! I think that you two would have a great time together in a city of water."

"Really?!" Steven whispered as his eyes were filled with stars.

"Really. You kids are young enough that a date like this means just having a good time together. Here; this should be enough," Nami

said as she handed Steven a wad of bills. "Consider this a one-time birthday present. The next time you ask for money, I'm charging you interest!"

Before Nami could say another word, Steven jumped and hugged her tight. "Thank you, Nami! You are the best! Is there anything I could do for you in return?"

"Again, just have a good time. I told you: it's your birthday gift! Now, don't immediately start with taking her on the date. Explore the place a bit...and get a game plan! Maybe ask around...you want to plan just enough that you have a basic idea of what you COULD do, but not be so meticulous that your date would be ruined for planning too far ahead. Also, I'd wear that shirt she got you for your birthday. That'd be the perfect touch!"

"Don't plan ahead...but plan ahead. Wear the new shirt. Gotcha! You're so smart, Nami! Thank you! Thank you!" Steven gave her a giant hug and tried to return to the others coyly despite his giant smile and red cheeks.

As Nami thought about the idea of Steven taking Connie out on a date, she heard a chuckle beside her and saw that it was Peridot and Robin. "Isn't it remarkable, Miss Navigator: young Steven asking her on a date?" Robin asked. "You never know what to expect with anyone it seems. Even the normally stoic Garnet is full of surprises..."

"You heard that?" Nami asked.

"It is a habit of mine. I've learn to eavesdrop since I was a child," Robin smiled. "It's second-nature to me."

"And what a quality it is! Truly this place and the people here are something to behold! Everyone is just so unique and full of life here...I can't wrap my gem around it. The allure of this 'Grand Line' seems to be affecting all of us...even the permafusion! I can't begin to make sense of it, but that's just fine. You just have to learn to go with it, am I right?"

The comment caused Nami to laugh. "You have no idea, Peridot.

You have no idea."

GWMAPT

In no time at all, the Going Merry finally reached the city of Water Seven and found a most-beautiful sight. The city was built on an island that was slowly sinking into the ocean, which allowed for a unique appearance. While there were still several areas of the city that was walkable on dry land, there were several canals and waterways that allowed for aquatic transport. The buildings were tall and elaborate, but the crown jewel was a giant water fountain in the center of the city.

What was even more amazing was that the Going Merry was not treated with any hostility upon its arrival. In fact, various locals pointed the ship to an area for it to properly dock itself. It was quickly realized that pirates were a large part of the revenue coming in and, as such, were tolerated so long as they did not cause any trouble.

Thankfully, the Straw Hats did everything they could to avoid trouble. In order to ensure that, the crew split up in smaller parties. Garnet and Pearl immediately separated themselves from the group, seemingly to search for Garnet's newspaper; Steven and Connie went on their own (with Steven as giddy as a schoolgirl at a concert); Robin convinced Peridot, Chopper, and Greg to accompany her shopping in the square; and Sanji went out on his own when he realized that his only other option was to stay with Zoro on the ship.

As for Luffy, Nami, Usopp, and Amethyst? The four of them had the prestigious job of bringing their gold into Water Seven to exchange it for berries.

"Amethyst, you don't have to carry the gold for us. We can use a wheelbarrow or something," Usopp told the purple Gem, who was carrying the entire lot of gold on her back.

"Meh. I'm bored. My wingman is gone and Greg is currently with the nerd squad. I figure that my best bet for some action is to stick with you three," Amethyst explained.

"What makes you think there will be any action?" Nami asked.

"It's you three. There is always action with you three."

"She has a point," Usopp nodded.

"How far am I lugging this stuff anyway?" the Gem asked. "Do we know anything about this place?"

"Nope! Let's ask somebody!" Luffy pointed around the streets until his finger ended up landing on a shop called "Bull Rentals." "Oh! That sounds like a good place to start! HEY! I WANT TO RENT A BULL!"

"LUFFY! DON'T RUSH INTO THINGS WITHOUT KNOWING WHAT THEY ARE!" Usopp and Nami yelled, rushing after him.

Amethyst, sighing, put down the gold and groaned. "Man...why can't something happen already? We've been here for, like, fifteen minutes. I'm bored as heck...maybe I should have gone with the nerds after all..."

GWMAPT

"...and so Rose ended up breaking the controls of the Ferris wheel trying to bring Sour Cream and I down! I felt like such a baby...it was so embarrassing," Greg laughed. "Still, it was the wakeup call I needed."

Greg was busy entertaining Robin, Peridot, and Chopper at a small café near the center of the city with stories of his past with Rose Quartz. Robin had become rather curious about Steven and Greg's histories lately and Greg found it surprisingly therapeutic to talk about his deceased love. It was not the first time they had talked about her since Mecha Island, and she found the stories incredibly fascinating. It was also a good way for Peridot to get a better understanding of Rose as she had not thought of her as anything other than the leader of the Gem rebellion.

"And Sour Cream was okay?" Chopper asked.

Greg stared at the reindeer and shrugged. "I mean; Vidalia didn't kill

me. That's always a positive thing. He seemed okay to me when he was doing the music at that party you guys threw last month."

"WAIT, THAT WAS SOUR CREAM?!" Chopper did a double-take. "NO WAY!"

"I...I thought that was obvious," Greg couldn't help but chuckle. "In the end, the moral of the story is that growing up is something that you have to decide to do by yourself. For me, that decision came about when Rose carried me around in a Ferris wheel bassinet."

"It sounds like you got into all kinds of trouble with Ms. Quartz," Robin laughed, amused at the idea of a younger Greg getting cradled like an infant. "You two sounded like you really understood each other..."

"Well, it didn't start that way. I mean, there are so many things about Rose I don't think I'll ever understand. She told me a lot about the Gem rebellion, but I know there were things that she couldn't bear to face. Being alive for thousands of years takes a toll on you...but what use is it thinking about that stuff? I've got my good memories to latch onto," Greg sighed and took a sip of coffee. "I like to think that despite all of the conflict she faced, I was her shining comet in the sky...though I'll never get what she saw in me."

"I think that'd be obvious listening to this story," Peridot picked up a fork and examined it.

The three other beings at the table regarded Peridot with surprise. "...are you gonna elaborate on that or leave me in suspense?" Greg asked.

"Nyehehehe! Oh, this is rich! How can you all not see what is clearly in front of you? I've mastered the art of human relationships by watching five seasons of *Camp Pining Hearts*, so I happen to be an expert on these matters," Peridot snorted. "She saw in you the capacity to create Steven! You were the logical choice for a human companion with your space gimmick and your love of music. You don't have to be a Citrine to see how compatible you both were!"

Greg had a blank look on his face before he found himself laughing.

"Oh, man...that IS rich!"

"No. That is the liquid known as 'coffee,'" Peridot pointed to Greg's cup. "I was referring to..."

"No, I get it! I was talking about what you just said! It reminds me so much of how Rose initially viewed our relationship...well, minus the Steven part. She didn't even know what babies were until she met Sour Cream! She might have liked me because of my talent, looks, and name...but she STAYED with me when she realized who I was to her and who she was to me," Greg tried to explain to Peridot. "Relationships like the one Rose and I shared are more than just filling up a compatibility checklist. They are about understanding each other and knowing who they are. It's...how do I put this? It's seeing the flaws in a person and liking them for how unique they make you...it is about having open communication and a willingness to do the right thing for each other..."

"I...I don't follow," Peridot frowned. "That sounds exactly what I just said! You two were compatible for each other! You liked music and she was a strong-willed Quartz soldier! Of course you would be drawn to her!"

"I can't say that her being a Quartz soldier is what drew me to her (or maybe it is?), but that is just the first step of a real relationship! Trust, openness, compassion, flexibility, legitimate love...without those things, a relationship would fall apart," Greg tried to find the right way to describe it. "I would tell you to think of Ruby and Sapphire's relationship as Garnet, but I don't think that metaphor would be the best one for you...and I haven't seen enough *Camp Pining Hearts* to use that. Hmm...Robin, help me out here. You're like, what? Twenty-five?"

"I'm actually twenty-eight," Robin asked, raising an eyebrow. She was curious to see where he was going with this.

"Really? I guess it doesn't matter; you've probably been in a relationship or two at some point. What did you look for in it? Help me explain this to her!"

The archaeologist was silent for a moment, carefully choosing her

words before responding. "I'm sorry to say that I have never actually been in a serious relationship."

"You don't say?" Greg asked, clearly surprised. "I mean, that's not a bad thing! I just...um..."

"It's quite alright. I am not offended," Robin told him. "I haven't had the time for relationships in my life. I've always found myself going place to place...it is not like I enjoyed my time working with Sir Crocodile. He never struck me as the type of person who would do well in a committed relationship anyway. No; I've been rather content with just myself up until rather recently."

"That's right!" Chopper spoke up, listening intently. "You left your home when you were young, right? What was it called again? Ohara?"

"That's right," Robin nodded. "It's a long and complicated story...I don't wish to bore you with the details."

"Hey; if I had to tell you three about the complicated mess that is my life, then next time we find ourselves chatting over coffee, we'll find the time to hear about yours!" Greg took one final sip of his drink. "Isn't that right, guys?"

"I'd love to listen to it!" Chopper affirmed.

Peridot also nodded her head very fast. "Indeed, Robin! I too would be interested in knowing the details of your complicated story! Especially if it can better help understand the intricacies of human relationships...and, I suppose, the meaning behind Garnet's permafusion status as well..."

"I..." Robin started to say before seeing Greg smile.

"We aren't pressuring you or anything. We are all Straw Hats, aren't we?" Greg gave her a thumbs-up.

Robin allowed herself to smile and gave a quick nod. "Perhaps another time then...now, how about we peruse some of the local shops? There might be some interesting items to purchase in a place like this."

"That's a good idea! Maybe they have some good books on medicine!" Chopper got up excitedly. "Can we go looking for some?"

"Sounds like a plan to me!" Greg left a healthy tip on the table and followed the three, letting Robin take the lead.

As the group walked on into the crowded city, they began to notice a strange sight. Several people seemed to be wearing masks. Chopper and Peridot asked about it, but Robin managed to figure out that mystery just by listening to the various people they passed by. She explained to them how there was a costume party on a nearby island and most of the people were either coming or going from it. The explanation satisfied the curious duo and they began to engage in small talk.

In the end, Robin was just happy to be in good company. These people truly accepted her and cared for her. She felt no animosity whatsoever from anyone in the crew. Connie and Steven always seemed to brighten her day, Peridot looked up almost as much as she did Amethyst, Nami enjoyed having someone not as rambunctious as the boys to talk to, and Luffy instantly accepted her as a companion. For the first time in her life, Nico Robin felt happy. She liked learning about the Gems, watching Luffy stick straws in his nose, singing songs with Steven, and showing Peridot about the beauty of something that Robin even doubted at times: life itself. It seemed like nothing could stop her whatsoever...until a person in a mask shattered her world. In a whisper that she alone could hear, Robin's spirit was broken with just three syllables:

"CP9."

The Jam Buds Date

"Are you sure you know where you are going?" Pearl asked Garnet. "It seems like it is very easy to get lost here..."

"I'm reasonably sure," Garnet nodded. "We just need to look for a specific shop and we should have exactly what we need."

The two Gems were wandering by themselves in the streets of Water Seven. Breaking away from the other Straw Hats early on, Garnet led the way through the antiquated structures without hesitation. She was seemingly on a mission and she wanted to complete it as fast as possible.

"This just does not seem right," Pearl told her as she looked around. "Do you really think that this could have happened under our noses...that she is actually here?"

"Pearl, we are currently traveling around in another dimension on a pirate ship with a human who can stretch his limbs like rubber and a talking reindeer who practices medicine. Anything is possible. How this could have happened, on the other hand, is perplexing me. If what we think happened actually happened, this affects the Grand Line just as much as it does Beach City...turn left up here."

As they continued on their walk, Pearl could not help but take in the sights. Water Seven was truly a beautiful place in her eyes. The effect of the buildings being supported above water and the canals in the streets brought to mind the city of Venice back in her home dimension, similarly to how Alabasta reminded her of the structures found in Egypt. The parallels between the two worlds were surprising to the Gem, who had grown to appreciate human culture more in the past year than she had in the past thousand. 'If this is the last place on the Grand Line I am visiting, then I am happy it is one so breathtaking,' Pearl told herself.

At last, Garnet pointed at a small stand in between a few buildings (though it was hard to make out at first due to a crowd of people in masks). The stand was run by a thin man with greying hair and a

mustache. Judging by the stand's appearance, it looked to specialize in antique newspapers. He was being ignored by practically everyone walking around him so when the two Gems walked up to him, he immediately looked up in surprise. "Ladies! Welcome to my kiosk! What can I do for you today?"

"Sir, we are searching for a newspaper from a few weeks ago detailing the disappearance of several jailed criminals from the Baroque Works organization," Garnet told him. "I trust that you have that particular issue."

"You mean the freaky underwater accident? Sure; I have a copy of that...but it's the last one I have. It's gonna cost..." the man began before getting stopped by Garnet.

The Gem produced a large sum of money and handed it to the man, who stared at it intently. "This should be enough to cover the cost."

"I...I..." the man stammered before running his hands through his hair. "I will get that for you right now! No problem! Nope!"

A few moments later, he produced the newspaper and handed it to Garnet. "Here you go! One newspaper! I...is there anything else I can do for you?"

Garnet shook her head and gave a quick nod. "That will be all. Thank you, sir."

As she turned and began to walk away, Pearl bowed to the man. "We really appreciate your generosity."

The man could do nothing but stare from the Gems to the large sum of money in his hands. "I...that was the best sale I have ever made in my life."

GWMAPT

After learning that bulls (or, as they were technically called, yagara bulls) were basically an aquatic horse, Luffy took his small group around for a tour of Water Seven. While the human trio enjoyed the sights, Amethyst was fairly bored. She had hoped that tagging along with Luffy would mean finding some action in this place. Sightseeing

like this was more up Pearl's alley than her's. She wanted a fight; instead she was forced to wait as a man calculated the cumulative worth of the Straw Hats' gold. As dull as it was, the only thing salvaging the moment was the absolute shock that Luffy and Usopp had when they heard the amount the man examining the money gave them.

"YOU WANT TO GIVE US ONE HUNDRED MILLION BERRIES FOR THIS?!"

"Keep it down, you idiots!" Nami slapped both of her male companions. "We don't want everyone to know how much money we are dealing with!"

"But...but...BUT IT IS SO MUCH MONEY!" Luffy yelled excitedly.

"And it is worth every berry," the man looking over the gold told them. "This gold...this gold is some of the highest quality material I have ever seen."

"This is great! We HAVE to have enough money now to repair Merry!" Usopp cheered.

"And so much more left over!" Luffy clapped his hands. "Oh man, what should we get? A statue?! More food?!"

As the two males shot ideas back and forth with each other, the gold examiner coughed to get their attention. "If there are no other questions, why don't we wrap this up? I'll go fetch your cash and..."

Before he could say another word, Nami immediately slammed her foot on the table where the gold was being weighed. The people in the room jumped, curious as to where this was going. "You. Little man. Before you get that money, allow me to fill you in on four things," Nami told him as she narrowed her eyes. "Number one: our captain has a one hundred million berry bounty on his head. Number two: my purple friend here has been itching for a fight and will gladly wreck the world of anyone who crosses us."

"That's true," Amethyst interjected, not understanding why Nami was saying this, but enjoying it nevertheless.

"Number three: your paltry offer is nowhere near the amount that you should be telling us. Finally...if you ever lie to us again, we'll cut you head off...right here," Nami told the now-shaking man. "So, allow me to ask you one more time: how much do you believe our gold is worth?"

GWMAPT

Steven was incredibly nervous and excited.

This was a moment that he had been secretly wishing he would get to do for some time. Here he was: a young lad who had just turned fourteen out with his best friend in an absolutely gorgeous city. He had money at his disposal and was prepared to take the lead on what he knew would be the best day of his life. Of course, his biggest enemy was his own nerves. He desperately wanted everything to go perfectly for his friend and, as such, overanalyzed practically everything that he was doing.

"Steven? Steven?" Connie was saying to him. "Earth to Steven!"

"What?" Steven blinked and shook his head. It was clear that he was lost in his thoughts longer than he was anticipating.

"Steven, you are letting your raspberry ice melt. It's starting to spill onto that piece of cake," Connie explained as she pointed to the dessert on his plate.

"It is? Oh! Well...I do like raspberry cake, so this works out nicely!"

"Steven, are you going to tell me what is going on?" Connie pried. "You keep alternating between acting overly-enthusiastic and then very quiet...are you okay? What's going on in that head of yours?"

"I..." Steven struggled to find the right words. "I...I just want today to go right..."

"What does that mean?"

The half-Gem took a large breath and stared his best friend in the eyes. This was it. This was the moment of truth. "Connie, you are such a wonderful person...and you deserve this more than anyone."

"Deserve...deserve what?" Connie asked, taken back.

"You deserve to be happy! You deserve to enjoy this! You are always so busy with school and practice and everything that...that I don't get to see you as much as I want to. I wish we could hang out more...that's all I've wanted for some time," he said as he looked down to the ground. "That's why this means so much to me..."

"Steven, I don't follow...what are you trying to tell me?"

"I just want today to go perfectly! I want you to be happy because I like it when you are happy!" Steven blushed. "If this is going to be our last time here for who knows how long...I want to make it special."

"Special?" Connie repeated. "Steven, I'm in another dimension with you! How ISN'T that special? This is one of the best experiences of my life!"

"It is?"

"Of course it is!"

"But...but is it special because we are in another dimension...or is it special because you are here with me?" Steven managed to ask.

The comment took Connie back as she tried to read her friend.

"Steven...are...am I missing something?"

"It's just that...I...I really like you and I have a really great time being with you! You're my best friend in the whole world and I just want to know if I make you happy too!" Steven spat out incredibly fast, causing him to pant.

For a few moments, Connie took in Steven's declaration and played it back multiple times in her head. Finally, she found the voice that she lost moments prior. "Is...is this a date? Steven, are you taking me out in a date?!"

"Yes...no...if you want it to be!" Steven told her. Before she could respond again, Nami's advice to own his response popped back in his head. This led to Steven holding her hands and squeezing them.

"B-B-Because I want it to be!"

The girl began to blush profusely, leading her to just stare at him. Finally, she gave a small nod followed by several larger nods. "Yes! Y-Yes, I do! I would really like for this to be a date! I've never been on a date before...can kids our age go on dates?"

"Nami said that it would really just be about us having a good time...which is what I really want for us to have!"

"Hmm..." Connie thought about it as she took a giant bite of cake. "I think that if we are going to do this properly, we should get more of this cake and ice!"

"Date cake it is!" Steven grinned. "And then we can walk it off sightseeing!"

"Mr. Universe, it is a date...literally," Connie replied with a mock bow, causing the two youths to erupt in laughter.

GWMAPT

"I believe this is a good, quiet spot to look this over," Garnet said to Pearl, motioning to a series of benches looking out at the water.

The two Gems sat down and pulled out the newspaper they just purchased. Pearl looked down worryingly at the paper and sighed. "Are we sure that this is even possible? I mean, it sounds crazy to think that this could have even happened."

"Pearl, you looked at the *Devil Fruit Encyclopedia* and told me that there have been no known Devil Fruits that can control the ocean. Given the fact that the odds of being given a power that gives control over the one known weakness of these abilities are incredibly slim to none, it stands to reason that this is not natural for this world..." Garnet gripped the paper tightly. "Before we fully jump to this conclusion, let's get all of the facts."

"You're right..." Pearl nodded and watched as Garnet opened the newspaper. They both scanned the articles until they finally came across what they were looking for. "This is it...hmm..."

"A Routine Prison Transport Makes Waves En-Route to Impel Down"

By Rin Herdger

After the attempted uprising in the desert kingdom of Alabasta, former Shichibukai Crocodile (quelled heroically by noted Marines Commodore Smoker and Ensign Tashigi), several brave Marines were tasked to deliver the criminal and high-ranking members of his organization, Baroque Works, to the famous Impel Down prison. However, it quickly took a turn for the worst when this seemingly routine mission met with an unexpected end. According to Marine Officer Katsuhito Yoshō, the situation not only turned out to be deadly, but had a watery twist.

"Protocol dictated that we split-up the insurgents in different vessels on the off-chance they attempted another uprising. Of course, they were all bound by Seastone cuffs, so they could not use their Devil Fruit abilities, but it was still a necessary measure," Yoshō told our reporters in a prepared statement. "Our ship contained the lead insurgent (Sir Crocodile) and three of his lieutenants. The second ship contained the rest. As we were roughly halfway there, a strange sight occurred."

Officer Yoshō proceeded to explain to our reporters that the ships entered a patch of rough water. While this sort of experience is not unusual on the part of the Grand Line the vessel was traversing, this particular patch was far rougher than anything the Marine was used to. "We did everything we could to stay afloat. It was a combination of our skilled Marines and our positioning that allowed us to safely deliver our prisoners to their destination...but the other boat was not as lucky. It was as if the ship was grabbed by the waves itself; dragged by its metaphorical grip down to the depths below."

Though evidence shows that there happened to be what could be described as waves that could fly ships to the sky, Officer Yoshō was quick to state the obvious. "We may never know exactly what happened to the fine men we lost in this accident. This was not a known-occurrence like the pressurized water stream near Jaya Island, but a grisly reminder of how uncaring nature can truly be."

Since giving us his interview, the wreckage of the second ship has indeed turned up not too far from the accident sight. While several bodies belonging to the Marines stationed on that vessel have been found, the corpses of the Baroque Works insurgents have seemingly vanished. Included below are sketches of the criminals known as "Miss Doublefinger," "Miss Merry Christmas," "Mr. 4," and "Lassoo." If anyone should come across any information about their current whereabouts of these criminals, please alert your nearest Marine base. Until then, we will keep you updated when it is safe to go back in the water.

Pearl and Garnet read every word several times and took a few moments to process everything. Neither truly wanted to consider just what the article meant for them. It was Garnet who found her voice first. "It seems like we were right...this has to be the work of Malachite."

"But how did she even get here?!" Pearl grabbed her head in frustration and leaned it backwards. "There is no possible way that she found her way to another dimension without the aid of a Rifting Stone! It. Is. Impossible!"

"We will just have to ask her that when we find her and break up the fusion party," Garnet said as she folded her arms. "Once we have stopped the Cluster, we will have to shift our priorities into returning back to this world...this is not their problem. If we have unleashed an unstable fusion that has a tactical advantage over the majority of the pirates and Marines here, it is our job to fix it."

"We...we have to come back here?!"

"Saving our Earth is the priority. Stopping Malachite will be our second. Lapis Lazuli deserves to be freed from Jasper...and Steven deserves his friend back."

"I...I suppose that it would be nice to come back again..." Pearl blushed. "Does your Future Vision show you anything?"

"No...nothing at all. It is odd that I cannot find a future where we face Malachite on the Grand Line...and yet, this is seemingly what we have to work with..."

"Well, your Future Vision has a track record of not always being perfectly accurate...I suppose we will just have to be on our toes...right?" Pearl looked to her leader.

"You know what they say: 'Drink up, me 'earty. Yo ho,'" Garnet told her with a quick smile.

"What...what does that even mean?"

GWMAPT

As time went on, Steven found himself more relaxed than he could remember. This was proving to be one of the greatest experiences in his life. Here he was: holding hands with Connie as they explored the canals of Water Seven on a bull they rented. The two were presently engaged in a very serious argument that would define how the rest of their day would go:

"The card mask is definitely cooler than the feather mask!" Connie argued. "Using the deck of cards to cover your face is creative and original!"

"But the feathers are just so cute! It's like a peacock on your face!" Steven laughed. "Isn't the silly factor enough to put it over the edge?"

"But we are arguing which is the best! All factors must be taken into account when deciding! I...oh my stars. Look at that!" Connie pointed to a new masked person in the crowd. The person was wearing a dog mask with a pinwheel on its head.

"No way. It can't be," Steven gasped. "Dog Copter mask for the win?"

"Dog Copter mask for the win."

GWMAPT

"WE ARE SO RICH!" Luffy screamed as loud as he could.
"NOTHING CAN STOP US FROM REPAIRING MERRY NOW!"

"Luffy, I don't think you yelled that loud enough for everyone to hear

it. I think there are still some people down the street who did not get the message," Nami grumbled.

The four pirates were now as happy as they could be. The three humans each carried a briefcase full of one hundred million berries each. In the end, they managed to obtain three hundred million berries for their gold horde. Despite Luffy almost throwing his briefcase away, the pirates remained focused on their destination: Dock One. The group had passed by it earlier in the day as they were carting around their gold, but a crowd was making it impossible to grant a meeting with the expert carpenters. It seemed like they were the pride and joy of Water Seven, which made Luffy all the more insistent that they were the ones to look over Merry.

Finally, they reached the entrance to the shipyard. The crowd had dissipated and only a few stragglers were left around. "So...what now?" Amethyst asked. "You guys have the money, right? What do you do from here? Look for that Iceburg guy and hope that he will fix the ship?"

"That's a good question," Usopp nodded. "Should we just walk in? Do we make an appointment or..."

Before Usopp could finish, Luffy ran to the entrance of the open dock and began to yell. "HEY! CAN SOMEBODY HELP US?"

"He's so rude sometimes," Nami groaned and hit her face in frustration.

In a flash, a man jumped over to Luffy and put a finger on his head. He wore a white cap and a high-collared orange and blue shirt. His most defining feature, however, was his long, rectangular nose. It was that feature that caught the attention of the Straw Hats almost instantly due to his uncanny resemblance to Usopp. "Hey! Let's talk outside, okay? The only people allowed in here are the Galley-La employees."

He motioned for them to follow him. He seemed to be oblivious to the stares the four of them were giving him. Finally, he regarded them with a smile. "So...um...what can I do for you?"

"Are you Usopp?!" Luffy asked in shock.

"I'M RIGHT HERE, YOU IDIOT!" Usopp hit his captain.

"Yeah. His nose goes like this..." Amethyst explained as she shapeshifted her nose into an exact replica of Usopp's. "And this guy's nose looks like this!" Amethyst did the same for the carpenter's nose.

The man raised an eyebrow and quickly gave Amethyst the once-over. Finally, he decided to get the conversation back on topic.

"Um...did you youngsters come here just to talk about my nose?"

"No! We've come looking for a man named Iceburg. Do you know him?" Nami asked as she handed the man the letter that Kokoro wrote out for them.

"A recommendation from Ms. Kokoro? Iceburg will definitely want to see this."

"Youngsters? 'Ms. Kokoro?'" Amethyst laughed. "How old is this kid? You sound like Pearl back in the Thirties!"

"I'm twenty-three...and to get back to the point, of course I know Iceburg. He's the mayor of Water Seven and the president of Galley-La...which means that he is incredibly busy. Now, what do you young...guys need? Is it as simple as repairing your ship?"

"Yes! Please! We will do anything for you guys to repair Merry!" Usopp begged.

"Well, I'll go over and check out the ship so when Mr. Iceburg is free, it will be easier for everyone to negotiate a price. Where are you guys docked?" the carpenter asked as he started to stretch his legs.

"By the peninsula...are you taking a bull there?" Usopp asked.

"Nah. That will take forever. I'll be back in ten minutes," he said with a grin. With barely any warning, the man ran and jumped into the wind faster than any person the group had ever encountered.

"Holy...that guy is faster than Garnet!" Amethyst let out a low

whistle. "This guy's a carpenter?!"

"This guy is awesome!" Luffy cheered once more.

"ARE YOU CRAZY? HE JUST JUMPED OFF THE SIDE OF THE LEDGE! HE'S GOING TO DIE!" Usopp panicked.

"Nah. Kaku's just a showoff," a voice called from behind them.

"That's why they call him the 'Mountain Wind' or something like that. Hell if I know."

The Straw Hats gazed upon the new individual who was talking to them. He had blue hair and blue lips and wore a red and orange striped jacket. Behind him was a blonde-haired woman with glasses. "Who are you?" Nami asked.

"Me? I'm Iceburg," the man nodded. "And who are you all supposed to be?"

"Oh! We..." Nami started to answer before getting stopped by the blonde.

"They are the Straw Hat pirates, sir. After a thorough investigation, we have concluded that their crew contains a number of known bounties in the form of Monkey D. Luffy, Roronoa Zoro, Nico Robin, and Steven Universe. In total, their combined bounty is worth 279,000,000 berries," she listed off. "They arrived with fourteen people after starting off from the East Blue."

"Ho-How the hell did they get all of that information?!" Usopp asked while sweating.

"Thank you for your help, Kalifa," Iceburg nodded. "Also, this mouse I just found...his name is Tyrannosaurus. Get him a cage and some fresh food as fast as you can!"

"It's already done, sir," Kalifa told him as she adjusted her glasses.

"Fantastic! That was faster than a shooting star!"

"You flatter me, sir!" Kalifa bowed and then looked down at her scheduling book. "Now, I must remind you of all of the important

things we need to do today. You have a meeting with the glass maker in the Chiza Hotel, then an important speech today in the square after which you will take the next sea train to Backslide to have a press conference with the mayor, and then..."

"I DON' WANNA DO THAT!" Iceburg whined loudly.

"Then consider them cancelled!"

"Can...can a mayor do that?" Usopp asked.

"Dewey would," Amethyst shrugged.

"I can refuse anyone I want! It's part of the package of being the mayor!" Iceburg grinned.

"Just because you can doesn't mean you should!" Nami scolded him.

"Yeah; you really aren't the best mayor I've ever seen," Luffy admitted.

"HOW DARE YOU INSULT THE MAYOR, YOU RUDE BRATS!" Kalifa suddenly snapped without warning. Faster than they could react, the secretary began to rain down upon them a barrage of kicks.

The sight of which made Amethyst a very happy Gem. "Woo-hoo! It's about time!" Amethyst proceeded to create one of her whips and was about to retaliate back before another person jumped in front of her, blocking Kalifa's kick and causing her to stop.

"Siiiiiiiis! Stop fighting these guys already!" the person whined. She was younger than Kalifa but older than Luffy. She had dark hair with a streak of blue in the front. Though she wore glasses like Kalifa, her's were round and wide unlike Kalifa's thin and narrow pair. "You're making a scene...or something like that."

"Oh!" Kalifa stopped mid-kick and tried to compose herself. "That was rather unbecoming of me. I just do not respond well to people insulting our wonderful mayor. He is the greatest shipwright our city has ever known!"

"...and also the one who ended up receiving most of the blows from your kicks," the mysterious woman laughed. She pointed at Iceburg, who was rubbing several bruises that appeared on his face.

"Yeah. Please don't make my secretary angry..." Iceburg sighed before looking at the unfamiliar woman. "Wait, who the hell are you?"

"Um...I'm Eirney Heca," the woman replied with a wave.

"Is that supposed to mean anything to me?" Iceburg cocked his head in confusion.

"Sir, she would be my half-sister," Kalifa clarified. "The same half-sister I have been reminding you about for the past week."

"That doesn't ring a bell," Iceburg narrowed his eyes.

"She would be the same half-sister who arrived today on the sea train," Kalifa tried again.

"Nope. Nothing."

"Sir, we literally met her there when she arrived."

"Eh, it hurts to think back that far. Whatever," Iceburg handwaved it. "Why are you here again?"

"Well, I've started to travel the world for a portfolio I'm putting together and..." Eirney began.

"Not you," Iceburg stopped her. "I'm talking to the pirates."

"Aww," Eirney said dejectedly.

"And we are the rude ones?" Amethyst muttered under her breath.

"Mr. Iceburg, we really need your help! Please! We even have a letter for you!" Nami pulled out Kokoro's recommendation letter and handed it to the man.

Curious about the letter's contents, Iceburg opened it up and read it

aloud. "Hmm...'Check their ship out.'"

Almost instantly, Iceburg ripped it up into a dozen little pieces. "WHY ARE YOU RIPPING IT UP?!" Usopp and Nami shrieked in horror.

"If you didn't want it, I would have eaten it," Amethyst said dejectedly.

"Sir, PLEASE! Please help us repair our ship! We have money...lots of money!" Nami begged.

"Our ship is hurting bad! Please save Merry, old man!" Luffy did the same.

"Mwell...okay," Iceburg simply shrugged.

"THAT WAS ALL THE CONVINCING IT TOOK?!" Usopp freaked out. "Then what was the point of scaring the hell out of us by ripping up the letter?!"

"Eh, Kokoro kissed the bottom of the letter. I hate that," Iceburg shuddered and then started to pick his nose with his pinky finger. "Besides, Kaku is already checking your ship out. We can't do anything else until he gets back, so why don't I show you guys around? I guess I was in the middle of trying to do that with what's-her-face over there before those other appointments I had to do."

"I'm Eirney!"

"If you say so," Iceburg replied. "This is at least something to do. I've been feeling bored lately."

"Tell me about it," Amethyst nodded. "I've been itching for some action for awhile now."

"Eh, there's always something going on around here. Give it time," Iceburg told her. "I just advise against getting on my carpenters' bad sides. If you though Kalifa was something, you should see all of them."

"Are they really strong?!" Luffy asked excitedly.

"The strongest there is," Iceburg nodded. "Now, do you want a tour or not?"

"You know it!"

"Wait! I almost forgot the briefcases!" Usopp turned around incredibly fast to retrieve the Straw Hats' money and say a startling sight:

Several men in black, armored lederhosen that had a pink star on it were in the process of stealing two of the three briefcases right under the pirates' noses. Almost immediately, they ran away with their prize as fast as they could. "WAIT! STOP! GIVE US BACK OUR TWO HUNDRED MILLION BERRIES!" Usopp shouted in panic.

"It's the Franky Family," Iceburg muttered.

"I knew something exciting would happen if I stuck with you guys!" Amethyst grinned as she created a whip. "Does anyone care if I call dibs?"

"Actually, I do," Iceburg frowned. "This is a Galley-La matter. Galley-La will take care of it. We don't want to be seen as weak by our customers."

Sure enough, the pirates watched as the so-called Franky Family escaped with their treasure on yagara bulls. Amazingly; a blond-haired man wearing goggles, a denim jacket, and smoking a cigar happened to be jumping down on them using two ropes to slam several members into each other. The Straw Hats just stared at the fortuitous timing of their hero, with Amethyst frowning the entire time. "Hmph...I could have done that with my whips."

The man proceeded to direct the bull back to Dock One and was incredibly close to the shore. "I take it he is a Galley-La carpenter then?" Usopp asked.

"Yep. That is one of the three best foremen that we have here. His name is Paulie," Iceburg explained. "He's a damn good worker, but he tends to get into a bit of debt quite often."

"Who cares about that? He got us back our money!" Usopp cheered.
"Hey! Mr. Paulie! Thank you for getting back our money!"

"Money? What money?" Paulie called out. He looked down and seemingly laid eyes on the briefcases for the first time.

Almost immediately, he turned his commandeered ride around to take off with the large sum of money. "HEY! DON'T USE OUR MONEY TO PAY OFF YOUR CRAPPY DEBTS, YOU ASSHOLE!"

GWMAPT

"...so we totally need a souvenir to bring back!" Connie told Steven later on in the day as they continued their date.

"I agree...it needs to be the perfect representation of our day! We need something short, sweet, and to the point..." Steven tapped his finger to the side of his face theatrically. "Any suggestions?"

"Well...since everyone seems to be wearing masks, why don't we get some too? They might not be as amazing as the Dog Copter mask from before, but they will be practically perfectly us," Connie suggested.

"That's a great idea! Why don't we pick out each other's masks? That way they are more personal and meaningful!"

"Lead the way, good sir!" Connie motioned to her date.

As the two started their search for a shop selling the right masks, they continued to engage in all manner of small talk. In many regards, this was not all that different for them than a regular day out. What separated today from other days was their desire to make it mean something more. Steven and Connie both enjoyed each other's company and could find enjoyment in the smallest things about each other. This day, in Steven's eyes, was about taking those feelings and showing Connie just how much he was enjoying it in his own way.

"Connie, this has been just...just wonderful," Steven told her after thanking a mask shop owner.

"But we didn't find the right masks yet!"

"No; I meant this! Us! This vacation has been perfect...even with the whole memory thing. But this is what I am going to remember the most!" Steven exclaimed. "Do y-y-you feel the same way?"

"Of course I do!" Connie blushed with excitement. "This is literally the best summer I have ever had. It's like a holiday that just keeps getting better!"

"A holiday, eh?" Steven smiled. "Of course it is! Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because we are spending it together...because I'm with you!" Steven let go of her hand and did a twirl. "I'm so happy right now I don't care who knows it!"

"Steven!"

"But it's true! This is just the perfect day...hmm..." Steven stopped for a moment and gave a knowing smile. "There has been one thing this day has been missing?"

"Our masks?"

"True...but if this is going to be a proper 'Jam Buds Date,' don't you think there needs to be a little music?" Steven raised his eyebrows up and down.

Not giving Connie the chance to respond, Steven raised his hand to the sky and pointed to the sun. "*Ain't it a glorious day? Right as a morning in May! I feel like I could fly!*"

"...really, Steven?" Connie giggled.

"*Have you ever seen the grass so green, or a bluer sky?*"

"Um...there isn't any grass..." Connie pointed out.

"*But it's a jolly holiday with Connie! Connie makes my heart so light! When the day is gray and ordinary, Connie makes the sun shine*

bright!" Steven grabbed her hand and danced her around, drawing the attention of several people around them.

"Steven, people are watching!"

"Happiness is blooming all around her! The daffodils are smiling at the dove!" Steven jumped on a bench and pointed to her. *"When Connie holds my hand, I feel so grand! My heart starts beating like a big brass band!"*

With that, Steven pantomimed his heart beating exaggeratedly. The crowd began to clap as Steven jumped down and looked Connie in the eyes. *"It's a jolly holiday with Connie...no wonder that it's Connie that I...I..."*

Steven found himself struggling to say the last word of the song. Noticing this, Connie put a finger on his mouth and winked at him. She then grabbed his hand and began to dance softly with him.

"Oh, it's a jolly holiday with Steven. Gentlemen like you are few. Though you're just a diamond in the rough (true), underneath your blood is blue!" Connie sang happily to him.

"I'm more of a Gem in the rough if anything..." Steven laughed.

"You always treat me right with proper kindness. You're goofy, charming, funny; yes, indeed! I really needn't fear when you are near. Your sweet gentility is crystal clear," Connie continued as she twirled Steven around.

"Aw, shucks," Steven blushed.

"It's a jolly holiday with Steven...a jolly, jolly holiday with you!" Connie finished with a small kiss on the cheek.

The youth stopped everything that he was doing and put his hand to his cheek. He looked at his hand and back at Connie, his star-filled eyes lost in a sea of emotions. The girl seemed to be just as shocked as her own action as he was. "You...you ki-ki-kissed my cheek!"

"I kissed your cheek," she whispered. "I kissed your cheek?"

With a giant jump, Steven exclaimed for all to hear. "YOU KISSED MY CHEEK!"

Steven felt lighter than air. He never thought he could feel so free after experiencing something as wonderful and glorious as this... monumental moment in his life. Throughout these two trips to the Grand Line, Connie was there for Steven in ways that he could never have believed. She went to save him despite knowing it would upset her mother, she fought in a war to bring him home, she performed commentary in order to be a part of the Davy Back Fight, and she reminded him how much he was loved when he lost his memories.

Nothing could bring him down now!

"Steven! Steven, get down!" Connie shouted, causing Steven to stop replaying the small peck in his mind. "You...you're floating!"

"I'm...I'm what?" Steven asked, looking down to the ground. He realized that, in his merriment, he never actually returned back to the ground. Instead, he was floating up in the sky (not unlike Petrea when she used her Devil Fruit power). "I'M FLOATING?!"

"You're floating!"

"THIS IS AWESOME! I DIDN'T KNOW I COULD FLOAT!" Steven cheered in the sky. He surveyed the beautiful sights around him. He could see the ship from where he was and could even faintly make out the Gems all together in the center of town with the others. They seemed to be engaged in something, but Steven decided to focus on the moment. "This day just keeps getting better and better!"

"That's so cool! How do you get down?" Connie called up and asked him.

"Get...get down?" Steven repeated. He thought about it for a moment and then blinked as realization set in. "I DON'T KNOW HOW TO GET DOWN!"

"Okay...okay...okay..." Connie started to pace below him. "We can think this out logically. Should I find the Gems?"

"No! We can do this by ourselves! This is our special day and we can do anything that makes us happy!" Steven called back down.

Connie snapped her fingers. "Steven, that's it! This is just like your shield!"

"No...my shield is pink," Steven frowned.

"Not like that! How do you summon your shield?" Connie asked.

"Um...uh...when I am trying to shield someone I care about?"

"Exactly! You need to care to summon it, just like you cared about the..." Connie started to blush as she tried to find the right words.

"Um...the kiss..."

"You mean because I was very happy and..." Steven stopped talking and hit his own face in frustration. "Of course! It is tied to my emotions...just like every other stupid power I have! So, if I want to control this, I just need to do what I just did! I just need to think of a wonderful thought..."

"Any happy, little thought!" Connie shouted back. "You can do it!"

"Okay...the crew? The ship? The Gems? Lion? My mom...wait, I don't really know how I feel about her right now...oh! Definitely my dad...and..." Steven tried to list off as many things that made him happy as he could. Finally, he realized exactly what he needed to think about...and the answer was right below him. "Connie!"

The mention of her name caused his mind to picture all of the wonderful times he shared with his best friend. Unfortunately, he found himself still in the air. "Why didn't it work?!" Steven began to realize that he would not be able to share those moments with her again if he was still stuck floating high in the sky. It was then that he was made painfully aware of the reality: his new powers were getting in the way of his date. The second that thought set in, he began to feel incredibly depressed. This was not what he wanted at all...until suddenly it was. "Wait! I'm falling! Why am I falling?!"

Steven found himself plummeting faster and faster towards the ground. Slowly, it dawned on him that while happiness caused him

to float, depression caused him to fall. While this was a good thing, Steven noted that he had no way of stopping himself from achieving a proper landing. Realizing that this was going to hurt and afraid to summon his bubble in the fear that it would negate the falling motion, Steven braced for impact. Unexpectedly, he was caught in the air by what appeared to be a humanoid gorilla wearing a conductor's outfit. Steven looked at his savior in awe as the being put him down.

"I hope you don't mind the help, but you looked like you were having problems getting down," the creature spoke in a refined voice. "First time floating, eh?"

"Wha...I mean, yes!" Steven nodded his head. He looked at the creature and noted that he had a kind face despite it being that of a gorilla. "Thank you for catching me! I didn't know I could do that and I just got so excited and..."

"Say no more. Let me guess: you just ate a Devil Fruit?" the gorilla asked.

"Nope! It's just my gem," Steven told him, unbuttoning his pink shirt to show his mother's gemstone. He found that the gorilla looked incredibly interested to see it, which was odd. However, he was not alone in staring. Another man was nearby talking to Connie and had glanced over himself. He wore a simple black shirt, several necklaces, and a giant brimmed hat with a red feather coming out of it. Steven could see that he had facial hair that made him look like a weasel, but he did not judge.

"I see...that is quite unique, Mr...I did not catch your name, young man," he inquired as he stretched out his hand.

"Me? I'm Steven. Steven Universe! That is my friend Connie!"

"Charmed. My name is Apollo. The gentleman talking to Miss Connie is my partner," Apollo shook his hand firmly. "Nero! Come here and introduce yourself to Mr. Universe!"

The man named Nero walked over to the two of them with Connie following close by. "Pleased to meet you. I have to say, we were

listening to your little song and we found ourselves quite impressed."

"Mr. Nero is a performer! The two of them just arrived in Water Seven today to prepare for a show!" Connie explained. "Isn't that neat?"

Steven gave a quick nod. "Yeah! My dad used to be a rock star when he was younger. What do you guys do?"

"I sing and my associate plays the fiddle," Apollo explained. "People pay good money to see a mink sing."

"What's a 'mink?'" Steven asked.

"Minks are...how do I put this? You know how you are a human?" Apollo asked.

"Well, I'm half-human..."

"That works. Being a mink is the same thing as being a human. I was born this way the same way that you were born the way you are," Apollo tried to explain to the two youths.

"So your race consists of humanoid animal-like beings? That is incredibly interesting! The mysteries of the Grand Line keep unfolding!" Connie squealed.

"Wait; so Chopper is a mink?" Steven asked.

"Chopper ate a Devil Fruit," Connie reminded him.

"That's right..." Steven responded, comparing Apollo to his reindeer-doctor in his head. "I guess you learn something every day!"

"So they say," Nero sighed. "Look, the two of us have to do some practicing before our performance, but if you guys are in town tomorrow, you should look us up. I assure you, it will be a show that you won't forget."

"I think we have to wait a week for the Log Pose to set, so we'll be there! Thank you again for your help," Steven bowed in gratitude.

"It was our pleasure. Thank you for the lovely song. We wish you the best on the rest of your 'jolly holiday,'" Apollo returned the bow after taking off his hat. "Miss Connie, it was nice to meet you."

"Likewise!"

"Wait!" Steven quickly asked before they left. "Um...do you know of a good shop that sells those masks that everybody is wearing?"

Apollo tapped his finger to the side of his face. "Hmm...try the shop near Dock One. I was in there earlier and was impressed with the sheer volume of masks they had."

"That sounds perfect! Thank you, Mr. Apollo!" Steven waved to him. "Come on, Connie! We'll find our masks yet!"

With that, Steven and Connie ran off to find the shop near Dock One. They could not stop talking about all of the amazing things that happened in such a short period of time: meeting a mink, singing a song, discovering a new power...

And the small kiss that neither youth could properly explain.

The Stolen Briefcases

"Oh, it seems like your guys are coming back with that guy who stole our money!" Luffy pointed out into the distance at an oncoming bull ride. "Isn't that great, guys?"

"No thanks to you two!" Nami yelled, pointing from Luffy to Usopp. "Seriously, you idiots can't leave that kind of money lying around like that. How else are we going to be able to repair Merry?"

"But Nami, the guy with the pigeon said he would take care of it! We didn't have anything to worry about!" Luffy whined.

"Just because it is working out in our favor doesn't excuse what happened!" Nami rubbed her temples in frustration. "Mr. Iceburg, who were those people that Paulie stopped anyway?"

"They would be the Franky Family," Kalifa explained for her boss. "They are professional ship scavengers, bounty hunters, and general troublemakers. They tend to constantly attack pirates such as yourselves who visit Water Seven. I would watch out for them if I were you; they will no doubt attempt to cause trouble for your group again."

"Bring them on. I prefer a straight fight from all this waiting around," Amethyst commented.

"If they attempt anything against you, go for it. But let me just warn you not to mess with their boss...if there is a person who you should not underestimate, it is Franky," Iceburg warned them.

"What's so special about him?" Eirney inquired.

"He is a ruffian, nothing more," Kalifa frowned. "Plus he is obscenely offensive."

"Well, you aren't wrong..." Iceburg rubbed the back of his neck before looking up to see the bull pulling up to the dock. "Ah, it seems your money is back."

"...and that is why you will never try to steal from another person and run again!" a pigeon perched upon a man with facial hair and a hat scolded. Dragging Paulie along by his ear, the man brought him back to the dock with the money in tow.

"I FOUND THIS MONEY FAIR AND SQUARE!" Paulie yelled at both the man and his seemingly talking bird. "I'LL REMEMBER THIS, LUCCI!"

"The only thing you should remember is not to rack up your gambling debts!" the pigeon shook its head. The bird then turned to Luffy and addressed the captain directly. "I'm sorry that the scumbag of our group caused you this kind of trouble. It won't happen again."

"THE PIGEON TALKED AGAIN!" Luffy freaked out.

"It's not that big of a deal," Amethyst shrugged, turning herself into a pigeon and perched herself on Nami's shoulder. "Look at me! I can talk!"

The action caused Iceburg and Paulie to jump back slightly, not expecting it to occur. On the other hand, Eirney moved in closer and began to poke the purple pigeon. "How did you do that? Did you eat a Devil Fruit? Is that why you are purple?!"

"Uh...no. I'm just a Gem. You wouldn't understand...dimensional nerdy stuff...Peri or Pearl could explain it better," Amethyst replied.

"What's a 'Gem?'" Eireny asked with interest.

"Not relevant!" Kalifa snapped. "The point of the matter is that your money is now returned, no thanks to Paulie's shenanigans!"

"HEY!" Paulie growled. "How was I supposed to know that it was theirs?!"

"We literally told you that it was ours," Usopp pointed out.

"Ugh," Paulie muttered and walked up to Luffy. The shipwright extended his hand and shook Luffy's. "That was your money, right? Well, I'm happy to say that I got it all back for you. I think that a ten percent finder's fee for my services should suffice..."

Before he could try to haggle any further, the man known as Lucci grabbed a hammer from a nearby pile of tools and hit Paulie in the face. Rubbing his wound, Paulie shot Lucci an angry look. "YOU ASSHOLE! YOU'LL PAY FOR THAT ONE!"

Producing a rope from his clothes, Paulie shot it out at Lucci's arm. The rope tied itself around his wrist as Paulie tightened it from his end. "**Rope Action: Bowline Knot!**" Without missing a beat, Paulie lifted his opponent into the air using the rope. "**Punishment!**" Finally, he slammed him right into the ground as hard as he could. "**Hook, Line, and Sinker!**"

"Nice use of the rope!" Amethyst observed with a smile. "He's pretty good with it!"

"Isn't this going WAY too far?!" Nami freaked out, clearly concerned for the shipwrights attack each other.

"Mweill...This is normal for them," Iceburg shrugged nonchalantly.

"Woah!" Amethyst pointed at the ground. Nami followed her point of view and saw that Lucci managed to stop hitting the ground completely by extending his right hand and holding himself up with a handstand. Upon closer inspection, Lucci was holding himself up by digging his fingers deep into the stone ground, not just by his palm. "That's what I'm talking about! That's like Pearl-levels of skill!"

"What does that mean?" Eirney pried.

"It means that I have gotten into way too many fights with Pearl over the years," Amethyst laughed.

"Am...am I supposed to understand that?"

"Nah. Don't worry about it. Gem stuff is kind of confusing."

"Try me," Eirney smiled. "I love learning about things."

Before Amethyst could try to explain the complicated relationship she has shared with Pearl, Luffy yelled out to Paulie. "Wait! Why are you attacking him? The one you should be fighting is...THE PIDGEON!"

"Wha...wait, what?" Paulie asked, rubbing his head. "Forget about the bird. Lucci is the one who hit me."

"BUT HE ONLY HIT YOU BECAUSE THE PIDGEON TOLD HIM TO DO IT!" Luffy yelled. He then directed his anger at the small, white bird still flying back to Lucci's shoulder. "DON'T HIDE BEHIND HIM! FIGHT YOUR OWN BATTLES!"

Unsurprisingly, the bird did not respond back to Luffy. However, the second the bird landed on Lucci, it bowed with respect and began to speak directly to the pirates. "I do apologize. It seems we made a bad first impression. My name is Hattori. This gentleman here is Rob Lucci."

"Oh! Hi! Nice to meet you!" Luffy responded with a smile. "Did you eat a Devil Fruit or..."

"Luffy, you really didn't figure it out yet? He's using ventriloquism!" Nami sighed, trying to disguise the fact that she only figured it out herself mere moments ago.

"REALLY?!" Usopp and Luffy began to clap at once. "THAT WAS SO GOOD!"

"It was nothing...really," Lucci replied through Hattori.

"Uh...not that it wasn't cool or anything, but I don't get it. Just...why?" Amethyst asked.

"That clown NEVER speaks directly. He always talks through that damn bird," Paulie laughed. It was then that Paulie decided to get a good look at Amethyst and Nami's dresses. "WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?! ARE YOU THAT SHAMELESS?!"

"...uh...what?" both ladies asked at once.

"You!" Paulie pointed at Nami. "How can you stand walking around showing that much leg and arms?! Can't you be more like her?" Paulie acknowledged Amethyst, who blushed. "Her only problem is showing too much arm! Her dress at least covers up most of her legs!"

"I...what?!" Nami asked, getting increasingly more irritated. "Did you just say that Amethyst is less shameful than me?!"

"Enchanté, good sir!" Amethyst bowed.

"Seriously, what are you trying to do to us?! The only girl who comes around here is Kalifa, and look at what she and her kid sister are wearing! All of the Galley-La workers are men! We will never get any work done here if you all keep flaunting your bodies like that!" Paulie started to get crazy, resulting in Lucci trying to restrain him.

"Calm down, Paulie! We aren't trying to seduce you! That would be sexual harassment!" Kalifa tried to bring him back to sanity.

"Oh, lighten up about the 'sexual harassment!'" Eirney scolded. "There is nothing wrong with a little flirting...isn't that right, Paulie?" The younger woman blew Paulie a kiss, which caused him to act even wilder.

"KALIFA, CONTROL YOUR KID SISTER RIGHT NOW! IT ISN'T NATURAL, I TELL YOU!"

"...these guys are REALLY weird..." Usopp commented as he watched the madness unfold.

"Eh, it doesn't matter how weird they are. These guys are the best of the best. Between them and Kaku, Galley-La has the most experienced talent on the Grand Line," Iceburg explained. "Look, we still have some time before Kaku gets back. Would you like a tour of Dock One?"

"Sure," Nami replied. The navigator looked back from Paulie's antics down to her own attire and then over to Amethyst's dress. The first thing that came to her mind was that the man would have gone crazy with the Gem's tank top outfit that she wore before getting poofed by Miss Doublefinger and the second was how insulted she was for being called shameless, let alone being considered more shameless than Amethyst. Regardless, she hoped that a tour would be enough to keep her mind on the present.

With that, Iceburg led them around an area where several

carpenters and shipwrights were working on multiple vessels. It struck Nami how engaged they were in their work and how the mood of the place brightened considerably when Iceburg showed his face. Iceburg knew everyone's names and they all seemed to put him in high regard. Kalifa, noticing this, explained to the group how Iceburg became the mayor of Water Seven and how being in such a high position did nothing to distract him from his carpentry skill or his love of the craft.

"Skill is the only thing that a carpenter can respect," Kalifa continued. "It does not matter how much political power one has or how much money is being offered. They rally behind him because they know that he is the genuine article...because he is deserving of the title of mayor."

Hearing all of this, Luffy decided to do what he did best: he walked right up to Iceburg and patted him on his back. "Man, everyone says that you are the best of the best here! Want to be our shipwright?"

"YOU RUDE BRAT!" Kalifa screamed, taken back by the sudden request.

Iceburg looked him over and laughed. "You really came this far without a shipwright in your crew? Well, I must respectfully decline your generous offer, but allow me to present a counter proposal: I don't know if any of my men would want to stop doing what they were doing here to become a pirate, but I won't stop anyone who does."

"Really?!"

"Really," Iceburg smiled.

As they toured the facility a bit longer, Luffy began to talk with Iceburg a bit more about his crew, including a few questions about having Nico Robin as a member of the crew, and Eirney kept trying to learn more about Amethyst, though the Gem kind of blew it off. Usopp began to explore a few of the more expensive cannons littered about the dock and Nami just took in all of the sights. Dock One could be described in one word:

Amazing.

Without warning, the familiar face of Kaku returned and landed in the center of the dock. The crew (outside of Usopp, who had seemingly wandered away despite leaving the briefcase he was guarding behind), gathered around the carpenter and were eager to hear the good news.

"You took a look over their ship, Kaku?" Iceburg asked.

"I did, sir."

"Well, what did you find? How bad is the damage?"

"Give it to us straight! We've got all of this money! We don't care how long we are waiting here for! We just want Merry fixed!" Luffy interjected excitedly.

"Allow me to be upfront and honest with you," Kaku said after a pause. "Your ship...it looks like it has been through quite a bit."

"She has! She traveled to another dimension and back, crossed into the Grand Line from the East Blue, and even traveled to Sky Island..." Luffy listed off. "The faster you can repair her, the better! We still have so many more adventures to go on!"

"Not in that ship," Kaku sighed. He adopted a stern expression and locked eyes with Luffy. "Even with our expertise, your ship just cannot be repaired. I doubt it would even make it to the next island...I'm sorry."

The Straw Hat crew fell silent as they absorbed the true meaning of what Kaku just said. It seemed impossible to believe. The Going Merry was such an integral part of the Straw Hats that she was almost like a member herself. This was the ship that managed to survive dimensional travel and even was host to a rave. This was the ship that flew to the sky and survived the fall back down.

This was the ship that personified the heart of the crew. How could it be unrepairable?

"Jeez...is it the keel?" Paulie asked, stopping his antics to recognize

the seriousness of the situation.

"What?! Who killed Merry?!" Luffy demanded to know.

"Not 'kill,'" Paulie replied and shook his head. "I said 'keel.'"

"That's the bottom of the ship, isn't it?" Nami asked. "Is it just that damaged?"

"Right on both counts, you shameless harlot," Paulie told her. "The keel is the most important part of any ship. You start with it and then build around it...it's basic carpentry. If the keel is damaged, you can't just take it out and slide a new one on. You would need to disassemble the ship piece by piece...basically, your ship is just a floating pile of wood ready to be scrapped."

"HOW CAN YOU BE SO DISMISSIVE ABOUT OUR SHIP?!" Nami freaked out.

"I'm just telling it like it is...I am sorry," Paulie offered his apologies.

"What about Steven's healing powers?" Amethyst asked, looking just as alarmed as her companions. It was clear that she was attached to the little vessel quite a bit, despite not being on it for that long. "Maybe we can use him to heal it!"

"Would his powers work on an inanimate object? It didn't fix that thing Peridot asked him to fix, right?" Nami asked, pacing back and forth. "And doesn't his spit not have a good track record of working? The last time it worked was healing me after Little Garden...unless you count Lufven..."

"Look, I don't know anything about healing powers or crap like that, but it still wouldn't work. Let's say that you magically fixed the keel. The rest of the ship would still be worn down and would still require a COMPLETE overhaul," Paulie tried explaining.

"So? We have money! Even if Steven can't fix the ship, can't we just remake the ship to be exactly the same?" Luffy pleaded.

"That won't work either," Lucci spoke through Hattori. "It might look like your ship, but it would not BE your ship. It would be different

wood and the ship itself relies completely on the wood being used. We can't be sure what trees were used or even if those trees exist anymore. There are no two ships in this world and there never will be."

"But it will still look like her! Isn't that enough?" Nami asked.

"No. A ship has a particular feel...a particular soul. You would know from the second you stepped on the ship that something was off. The people who would be the most affected are you and your crew," the bird elaborated. "If you want us to make a duplicate, we can... but don't expect it to be your old ship. Expect it to be a pale imitation of an old friend who lived a good life."

"...that makes no sense!" Amethyst ran her hands through her hair. "You're saying that the ship has a soul? Are you saying the ship is alive?"

"No...I get it," Nami told her as she wiped away a tear. "The ship isn't alive like you or me...but she is distinctively our Merry. We would be able to tell. Steven told us about how you have piles of stuff all in your room back home. Imagine you lost all of your things, but then got new ones that looked like it. They may be incredibly similar, but you wouldn't have the attachment to the particular memories that the originals brought you. Is that what you guys are saying?"

"That's right," Kaku confirmed. "I truly am sorry...if there was something we could do for you, we would...but it is impossible."

"Well, you can always look at it from another angle," Iceburg tried to tell the hurting crew. "Your ship has lived a long life, but now you can buy a brand new one. It is amazing that your ship lasted this long on the Grand Line...it definitely would not be able to deal with the strength of the sea past Water Seven..."

Luffy stood still for several minutes as he continued to process what the four of them told him. No matter what he did, they were trying to make it clear that he would never be able to restore his ship back to the condition she was when they set sail from Kaya's mansion all those weeks ago. The Going Merry was on her last leg of life...no

amount of doctoring or patching could change that in their eyes. Luffy was the kind of pirate who believed that a ship was just as much of a part of the crew as the people, reindeer, and Gems that populated it. In many ways, she defined the Straw Hats...

This was why Luffy refused to believe that she would go down without a fight.

"NO! I REFUSE TO ACCEPT THAT MERRY CAN'T BE FIXED! SHE HAS BEEN THROUGH SO MANY AMAZING ADVENTURES! HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT HER ADVENTURES HAVE COME TO AN END?! SHE JUST SAILED TODAY AND I KNOW SHE CAN SAIL AGAIN!" Luffy projected his heart and soul into his declaration.

Iceburg gave him a cold, hard stare and sighed. "Then you have a death wish. What kind of captain would put the love of his ship over the wellbeing of his crew?"

"Hey! Can't you see that this is rough for all of us?!" Amethyst snapped. "What makes you think you can talk to us that way?!"

"I can do as I damn well please...but you have a point," Iceburg conceded. "This conversation is over for today. I can see that we will not get anywhere while you are in this kind of state. Come back when you are ready to buy a new ship. You've got more than enough to get something top-of-the-line. Kalifa?"

"Already on it, sir," the secretary spoke up. She produced a catalogue and handed it to Nami. "Please think it over and take a look at the models listed in here. You'll be able to find something to suit your crew's needs."

Before anyone could respond, another shipwright ran over to the congregation. The man was shirtless with tattoos on his muscular chest. He had a thick mustache, sunglasses, and black hair that spiked out in the back in a little tuft pointing to the left. "Mr. Iceburg! You have more guests from the World Government at the front door! Do you want me to kick them out again?"

"Yeah! Tell them I'm not here! I...Lulu, did you forget to comb your hair today?"

The man named Lulu paused and shifted his small tuft from the left to the right. "Much better! Hmm...I'll tell them to try back later."

"Sis, you didn't tell me you associated with rebels who defied the World Government!" Eirney whispered excitedly.

"There is a lot I don't tell you...for obvious reasons..." Kalifa muttered to her.

"NOT SO FAST, ICEBURG!" a new voice called out. It belonged to a man in a suit and hat that was being flanked by two similarly dressed men. He had long silver hair and long sideburns that connected to his handlebar mustache.

"Make yourself scarce! These guys are in the World Government!" Paulie hissed to the Straw Hats.

"You don't need to tell us twice!" Nami nodded quickly. "Let's go... that means you, Amethyst!"

The Gem grumbled as she was hurried away by her friends. "Why can't I fight those guys? Aren't they, like, your version of Homeworld?"

"WE ARE NOT FIGHTING THE WORLD GOVERNMENT ANYTIME SOON!" Nami hissed.

With that, Luffy and the others watched as Iceburg was led to a private place to talk alone with the Government officials. After they left, the Straw Hats were left alone with the shipwrights and Eirney, who was trying to cling to Lulu's arm much to Paulie's displeasure.

"Have you no shame whatsoever?!" Paulie flipped out.

"Is that a brand of something?" Eirney smiled.

"DON'T PLAY DUMB WITH ME!" Paulie roared.

Lucci patted Paulie shoulder. "It isn't worth it. For what it's worth, I'm sure Kalifa will scold her for it when they are done talking."

"Hrmph," Paulie grunted. "I'll give HER a piece of mind another

time...still, does anyone know what these stooges want this time?"

"It's not our business to meddle," Lucci replied, continuing to speak through Hattori. "I'd drop it."

As they were talking, Amethyst started to grab the briefcases and idly tossed them in the air to catch them. She was clearly trying to distract herself from the depressing situation at hand. Unfortunately, Nami was not about to have any of that. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH OUR MONEY?!"

"Tossing it," Amethyst muttered.

"I CAN SEE THAT! *WHY* ARE YOU TOSSING IT?!"

"Eh, don't worry about it. They are light enough to not make a difference," the purple Gem countered.

"IT'S NOT ABOUT HOW HEAVY THE CASE IS! WHAT IS INSIDE IS WHAT MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE!"

"Jeez, 'Pearl.' Calm down. See? They are perfectly fine!" Amethyst told them, opening up the two cases she was tossing to show them the contents. The Gem was confused by the pale, shocked look that was affixed on Nami's face upon opening them. "What? What did I do? I..."

It was now Amethyst's turn to feel taken back. Both briefcases were completely empty and, upon closer examination, were not even the briefcases that Usopp was holding. "I didn't do it!" In response, Nami let out a giant scream, causing the congregation to collectively jump in shock.

"What part of 'World Government' don't you understand, you shameful harlot?!" Paulie snapped at them.

"OUR MONEY IS GONE! WE ONLY HAVE ONE BRIEFCASE LEFT!" Nami began to utterly panic.

"Calm down; I am sure you will find it," Lulu told them, prying Eirney off of his arm. "Kaku, weren't you with the Franky Family earlier? Did they take it?"

"What?" The long-nosed carpenter raised an eyebrow. "I haven't seen those clowns all day."

"But I saw you being carried away earlier...your nose is pretty unmistakable..."

"Wait...USOPP HAS AN UNMISTAKABLE LONG NOSE!" Luffy chimed in, recognizing the gravity of the situation.

"Are you saying those guys from earlier kidnapped that liar-guy and stole the money?" Amethyst asked, getting angrier by the second.

"It looks like it. Those ruffians are always getting into trouble," Kaku scowled.

"And this wouldn't be considered a Galley-La thing, right?"

"Why would it be?" Kaku inquired.

"Then these guys are going to get the thrashing of a lifetime," Amethyst roared. She materialized her whip and began to run off. Luffy, being just as impulsive and reckless, did the exact same thing. Nami was the only one left and, as such, was the only one to do the sensible thing and find out where the Franky Family called home. Grabbing their bull, Nami sped off toward the hideout known simply as the "Franky House."

But she was not prepared for what she encountered along the way. Not too far away from the dock was a large crowd of people surrounding a seemingly lifeless form. As she got closer, Nami recognized it as being Usopp. The poor man was bruised, broken, and nearly catatonic. Amazingly, he was not alone.

"Usopp! Who did this to you?! What happened?!" the neurotic voice of Pearl called from his side. The dainty Gem and Garnet were both by his side, confused and concerned at the same time.

"Guys, I'll take it from here!" Nami shouted, making her way through to get to them. The Gems took a step back to acknowledge her.

"Navigator Nami, please tell us what happened to him!" Garnet demanded, her fist turning into her trademark gauntlet. "I want to

know who is responsible for this!"

"It was the Franky Family!" Nami explained, trying to hold back tears. "They kidnapped Usopp and stole most of our money!"

"Money can be replaced...but he cannot," Garnet said bitterly. "We need to know everything about this 'Franky Family.'"

"I'll tell you along the way," another voice told them. It was Amethyst, speeding toward them. She stopped when she realized that Usopp was on the floor. She knelt down and patted his head. "Holy...don't worry, dude...I'll dish them back double what they gave you!"

"Amethyst, they are humans! We need..." Pearl started before Garnet stopped her.

"These men attacked one of our own and endangered the wellbeing of our crew. We will do what is right," Garnet commanded. "Navigator Nami, I assume you know where to find them."

"I do. They are..." Nami started before getting stopped by the trembling form of Usopp. The pirate was crying, clearly incredibly weak and broken. "Usopp!"

"N-Nami, I failed!" he managed to get out after a moment. "I let them...take the money. We we-were finally ab-able to fix Merry! Now she is dead...because...because...because I am so useless!" With that, the marksman broke down in tears even harder than before. "I AM SO SORRY!"

The three Gems and the navigator were silent as they listened to their friend cry. Finally, it was Amethyst who broke the ice. "You aren't useless, Usopp. Leave this to us. We'll get back the money... don't worry about it!"

She gave Garnet a hard, angry stare. The leader nodded and bent down to Usopp's level. "Your injuries are too severe to risk moving beyond this point. You have fought admirably, but it is our fight now. Pearl, we will need your help on this. Navigator Nami, tell us where to go."

As Nami told the Gems everything that Paulie told her, they failed to

noticed the odd sight of a young boy floating in the sky on the other side of Water Seven...

GWMAPT

"Has anyone managed to find her yet?" Greg asked the returning Peridot and Chopper. The three of them had decided to split up and meet back at the café where they were enjoying a light meal before Robin had disappeared. All three of them were concerned about the sudden disappearance of their friend, and they figured it was better to search more ground apart than together. Greg had hoped that they would bring back the lost member of the crew.

What he was NOT counting on was Chopper brining Sanji over to them. It was not that his was an unwelcomed face, but it was a surprising one all of the same.

"That is NOT Robin, talking animal!" Peridot shook her head in frustration. "Our mission was to locate Robin!"

"I'll take that as a no..." Greg sighed.

"Actually, that's not entirely true," Sanji spoke up, lighting his cigarette. "I saw Robin-chan before with a shady guy in a mask..."

"And that did not strike you as odd or being out of the ordinary?!" Peridot snapped.

Sanji shot her a defeated look. "Look, I thought it was Chopper in his other form. How was I supposed to know that she would up and disappear? All I am saying is that this doesn't feel right..."

"Why? What's up?" Greg asked, concerned both for Sanji's wellbeing and Robin's whereabouts.

"I've been thinking about that shitty Admiral and what he said about Robin-chan's past..." Sanji trailed off. "I don't know; I'm just concerned. Why would he say those things? What if somebody was out to get her?"

"Then we will smite them where they stand!" Peridot declared.

"Nobody messes with the friends of the great and powerful Peridot!"

Sanji couldn't help but laugh. "Look at you go. I've got to say, you are just full of surprises."

"What does that mean?!"

Before Sanji could respond, a figure fell from the sky and crashed into the ground inches away from them. Preparing for anything, Sanji and the others braced themselves for a fight. Amazingly, it turned out to be Luffy.

"Wha...Luffy, you idiot! What the hell are you doing?!" Sanji picked him up from the hole he made. "Are you trying to kill us?!"

The captain shook his head and looked around, rather confused about his surroundings. "Nope! I just tried to fly like that carpenter and...there's no time for that! We need to find the Franky Family!"

"The...what are you talking about?!" Sanji asked.

"These guys came and kidnapped Usopp! They stole most of our money! We've got to stop them!" Luffy started shouting as fast as he could. "Come on!"

"Slow down there, champ," Greg told him, scratching his head. "You just fell from the sky. I think you are a bit disoriented."

"I don't care about me!" Luffy countered. "I care about Usopp! He is hurt and in trouble!"

"Do you think they are responsible for Robin's disappearance?" Peridot asked, a hint hope in her voice.

"Robin is missing too?!" Luffy asked sharply. "This is bad...these Frankies are gonna pay!"

"Good shit. What's the plan?" Sanji asked. "Where are these guys?"

The silence that followed that simple question was all the answer the group needed. "...you have no idea at all, don't you?"

"Nope! I'm just gonna keep going until I find them and kick their asses!" Luffy cracked his knuckles. "Who is with me?"

GWMAPT

Leaving Nami to tend to Usopp, the Gems went ahead to try to find the Franky House. As Amethyst sprinted ahead with the Gems by her side, she found herself surprised at how personally she was taking this. Though she had not been on the ship as long as Steven or the others, she understood just how important the Going Merry was for her friends. It was their home for months and was literally by their side every step of the way. Hearing those shipwrights explain that Merry was practically dying must have been one of the hardest moments in the Straw Hats' life.

But it was not Merry that was dominating her thoughts; it was Usopp.

Amethyst was first to admit that her first thoughts about Usopp was that he was a bit annoying, but she always thought his heart was in the right place. He was always ready with a joke or some kind of exaggerated comment. It struck the Gem odd at first to see how cowardly he actually was, but she admired his bravery in battle. That was as far into his personality that Amethyst dived into.

But when Amethyst heard Usopp's declaration of weakness, everything began to make sense. He was not joking or lying to hide his fear of fighting; he was doing those things to hide his true feelings on inadequacies. The only other member of the Straw Hats who did not possess either a unique ability or fighting potential was Nami. However, she was at least brave and smart, which caused her to realize that it was important to fight only when necessary. Usopp was clever enough to build weapons and to use his traps in battle, but Aokiji changed his outlook on his opponents. Amethyst had overheard his realization that his enemies were only getting stronger. At the time, she dismissed it as a human breakdown, but this was different.

Usopp considered himself a failure. This hit home for Amethyst.

Though so hated to admit it, Amethyst herself often felt like the most useless member of the Crystal Gems. She was not as experienced as Pearl or as strong as Garnet. This feeling was only intensified when Peridot happened to point out to her that she was actually

defective in her own way. It turned out that she emerged five hundred years too late from when she was supposed to, explaining her shorter stature compared to another Quartz Gem like Jasper or Rose. Hearing that devastated her quite a bit and she tried to hide it in many ways.

Back home, she would typically hide her frustrations with herself through wrestling as Purple Puma. It was a fun thing that she started as a coping mechanism that led to some quality time with Steven, but things were different here. On the Grand Line, she was not in a world that contained Gems. She was uniquely the lone fully Quartz Gem, and that brought her some happiness. But "some happiness" did not mean "true peace." She did not want to admit it, but she was still hurting over the memory incident from the last week. It was hard facing those feelings and it was hard to remember her place in the Crystal Gem hierarchy. As such, she found a new coping mechanism: fighting.

Though Pearl would no doubt disapprove of it, Amethyst picked up quite quickly that this dimension was inherently more violent and full of violent people than the Gems were used to. That did not mean that these people were bad by any means, but it was a bit different than the calming allure of Beach City. She understood that it was the way of life here. As it stood, the Gems were also predisposed to fight due to the nature of their opponents and to Amethyst, finding the people who attacked her friend were no different than fending off Jasper after she imprisoned the Gems when she invaded Beach City. The difference is that it was always a variation of Gems fighting each other. Rose always preached to leave humanity out of their fights due to their fragility and beauty. It was not their fault that the Gems from Homeworld interfered with their planet.

This place, however, had no such limitations. People like Zoro and Luffy could be described as anything BUT frail. This was why it was easy to confront Baroque Works when they first arrived to get Steven back and why they confronted Aokiji. Amethyst joked about wanting to get into a fight to fend off boredom, but the truth was that she truly wanted to find some fun and amusement. The Franky Family seemed like they would initially provide that fun.

But they crossed the line when they attacked her friend. It is one

thing to steal from a Crystal Gem; it is another to hurt one of them. Pearl might not consider them one, but Amethyst considered the others to be members of the team just as they accepted her into theirs.

It was for that reason that she would fight for Usopp.

"Amethyst! Keep focused!" Garnet forced Amethyst to return to the present. "We are near the ship! That means we are not that far from their base."

"Thank goodness! The sooner we procure the money, the sooner the ship can be fixed and we can focus on the Cluster and figuring out where...excuse me! Pardon me! Please move, humans!" Pearl talked as she ran, now slowing down to try to get through a large crowd of people. "We are trying to pass by you!"

"HEY!" Amethyst angrily yelled at the crowd of people. "MOVE!"

Knowing better than to question an angry purple woman, most of the crowd cleared a path for the Gems to continue moving. After thanking the people in the crowd, Pearl decided to do just that while continuing toward the Franky House. "Amethyst, what has gotten into you?! I know the liar is injured, but..."

"Usopp," Amethyst interjected. "That's his name!"

"Yes, him," Pearl nodded, not understanding Amethyst's feelings on the matter. "We will fix all of this in no time at all. There is no need to be rude to the humans!"

"I'm not trying to be rude to the humans! I'm trying to avenge my friend and get back the money for those guys so they can figure out what to do!"

"What are you even talking about?" Pearl asked, stopping her sprint. Amethyst and Garnet did the same, and it was clear that something was wrong. "Amethyst, this isn't like you...are you okay?"

"No! No, I'm not okay! That kid got beaten like a pulp trying to keep the money safe and do you know what the horrible part is?" Amethyst started to tear up as she acknowledged both of her

friends. "The ship that he is fighting to repair is dead! They can't fix it! That poor kid doesn't even know yet! It is going to kill him!"

Pearl gave the purple Gem a hug, trying to calm her down, but she pushed away. "No. We can't stop, guys. We need to do this for him! We need to do this for Usopp!"

"You...you can't be serious..." Pearl asked. "Not about that, but about the ship...there has to be something that can fix it! Maybe if we wait for the fireman and the chocolatier to come back with more money, they can get better materials and..."

"No. She is right," Garnet folded her arms and looked toward the approaching dock where Merry was resting. "I didn't want to believe it, but the Going Merry is irreparable after all."

"You knew?!" Amethyst growled.

"It was a possibility," Garnet frowned. "I was praying that it was only that."

"Well, what do you see after that?! Is there anything that can help us?!"

Garnet was silent for a moment as she stared into the void of infinite possibilities. Finally, she shook her head and put her hand on Amethyst's shoulder. "It is too difficult to see where we are going right now and where we will end up beyond the immediate future. The future...it is harder to read here than at home. Even there my Future Vision was never completely accurate. I blame this not being my home dimension...but I can say that we need to do this...for Usopp and for the Going Merry."

Although secretly hoping for some kind of closure for the situation, Amethyst understood the limitations surrounding Garnet's abilities. It meant more that she was willing to acknowledge who they were fighting for than come up with a million alternatives to getting back the money.

As they got closer to the Going Merry, they spied a familiar face jumping off of the ship. They paused to allow Zoro a moment to

catch up to them. "Oy! Where are you guys running off to? What happened?"

"Usopp has been injured and we are going to get back the money that his attackers stole," Pearl explained. "I assume that you will be accompanying us?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Zoro replied as he patted his swords. "But before we go...have you guys heard about Merry?"

"Yeah...wait, how did you hear?" Amethyst asked, cocking her head in confusion.

"That guy who looked like Usopp came and examined the ship while I was on it. He told me everything. I mean, it makes sense when you think about it."

Pearl gave the swordsman a confused expression. "I don't follow."

"When a person gets injured, his scars only make them stronger. People learn and grow...their wounds eventually heal. But with a ship, the wounds linger. It gets weaker and weaker with every blow. In the end, this was bound to happen," Zoro sighed.

"How can you act so...so calm about it?!" Amethyst snapped. "You've been on this ship longer than nearly anyone, right?"

"Look, I don't like it at all. Merry, for all intents and purposes, has been my home. But we can't focus on something that we can't fix. I mean...this afternoon is turning into a shit show," Zoro rubbed his eyes in frustration. "Does Usopp know about this?"

"No, he got attacked while we were all finding out," Amethyst told him.

"That makes it even worse. This ship was given to us by someone who he really cares about...he is not going to take this well."

"We will cross that bridge when we get there," Garnet interjected. "We are wasting too much time standing around."

"Agreed," Zoro nodded, putting on his traditional bandana.

"WAIT!" a voice called out, surprising them. The Gems and Zoro saw Nami running with all of her might toward them. She was clutching the last remaining briefcase with all of her might.

"The navigator?! Why is she here?! Why isn't she with Usopp?!" Pearl asked, clearly very shocked to see Nami at a time like this.

"I...I..." Nami panted, finally reaching them and catching her breath. "I came here to get Chopper. I figured he could look at Usopp for us before we moved him."

"Your heart was in the right place, but he is not here," Garnet told her. "He is still out in the city with the others. As it stands, you should guard the ship and the remaining money while you are here. I cannot say whether the others will bring back anything of value when we reconvene with them in a few days, but this is the only money you have for right now. It needs to be protected."

"Right," the navigator nodded. "I'll just get in the way anyway. Will you guys get Usopp after you get our money back?"

"Of course. For now, keep your mind on the present. We will take care of this."

Leaving Nami behind, Amethyst raced on ahead of her companions to reach the Franky House first. It was a colorful house that looked patched together with practically anything that could be found. The two defining features were a giant crescent moon built into the roof and a sign that let visitors know exactly whose house it belonged to. Unfortunately for her, she was not the first to arrive. Standing in front of the building were Luffy, Sanji, Chopper, Peridot, and Greg. They seemed to be huddled around something that Amethyst could not see at first. As she got closer, she realized just what it was:

A bloody, battered mess that resembled Usopp.

"What happened?!" Amethyst freaked out. "He was practically knocked out before! How did he get here!"

"Oh my stars," Pearl gasped upon seeing him. "THIS was the state you left him in?!"

"We didn't know where to go to get here, but we followed this trail of blood," Sanji explained, getting angrier by the minute. He pointed to several small, dried blood drops staining the ground leading away from the house. "We thought he was just kidnapped for the money, not beaten up and left for dead."

"We found him before. He was beaten up pretty badly, but not like this. Nami left him in the center of town to find Chopper," Amethyst explained bitterly. "Don't tell me that he came back here to get the money after she took off..."

"That is what it appears to be," Garnet whispered, clearly very angry. "This is unacceptable."

"Do you guys want me to bring him back to the ship?" Greg asked, bending down to Usopp's level. "I don't think I will be of any help right now....I'm not really a fighting guy..."

"You will be of great help by taking Usopp away from all of this. Chopper, you should look him over," Garnet suggested.

"Not yet..." Chopper (who was in his human form) shook his head. "I need to do this first."

Amethyst looked over all of her friends. With the exception of Greg and Peridot (who both looked more concerned than anything), all of them had a fire in their eyes. It was clear that an attack on one of their own was an attack on themselves. The Franky Family had crossed a line and it was time to show them the consequences.

As Greg took Usopp back to the ship, the Straw Hats determinedly walked toward their destination together. Peridot, who was not a fighter by any means, was also standing with them. This surprised Amethyst, but she was pleased to say the least. The Gem was obviously terrified of confrontation, but something was driving her to stay with them.

Finally, they reached the door. The sound of celebration could be heard from the inside. It seemed like the Franky Family was throwing some kind of party, no doubt using the money pilfered from the pirates. Without saying a word, Luffy proceed to send a giant

punch into the entrance, breaking it open into pieces. The inhabitants of the Franky House, all wearing variations of the uniform seen earlier in the day, looked shocked to see the number of intruders attacking their house. Finally, one of them got the courage to speak. He appeared to be the tallest one in the room and was wearing even more fortified armor than the other scavengers.

"If it isn't the Straw Hat pirates! Come here to get your money back? Look at this, guys! These idiots look like wimps!" he laughed, mocking the crew. "I mean, look at that one! She looks like she is ready to dance! She isn't intimidating at all! Then again, this is the crew that had such a pathetic loser as that long-nosed idiot in it! He just would not get the message that the Franky Family is the strongest people in Water Seven!"

With that, the various members of the Franky Family laughed at the pirates. However, the Straw Hats would not retort back. It was clear that this was a pompous show of strength by the Franky Family. Soon enough, they would realize just what they were dealing with.

"I'll give you one hit, girlie." The man went up to Pearl and pounded his chest. "Let me warn you that you'll probably break a nail."

Without giving him a chance to reconsider, Pearl materialized her staff and went in for a single slash. The strength of the attack was enough to split the armor in two. As the Franky Family looked on in shock, Pearl then stepped aside for Garnet to launch her clenched knuckles directly into his chest. The man was sent flying back into the wall.

"You didn't specify which 'girlie' got the one hit. I assumed you meant each of us," Garnet told the frightened crowd. "That would make it Amethyst's turn."

"I dunno. It seems that guy is out. I guess I'll have to find somebody else," Amethyst sighed, cracking her whip onto the ground.

"WHAT THE HELL?!" somebody shouted in fear. "DID YOU SEE THAT?!"

"HER HANDS JUST FIRED OFF OF HER ARMS!"

"Can...can we talk this out like civilized people?" a Franky Family member walked up. Thinking that he would have an opportunity to attack them during a plea of mercy, the man started to pull out a gun. In reply, Luffy punched him as hard as he could.

Realizing that these pirates meant business, one of the scavengers ran over to a cannon and started to fire it at the crowd. Not missing a beat, Zoro used his swords to slice all of the cannonballs before they could strike. Naturally, this caused the crowd to freak out even more than before. This only intensified when it became apparent that he also managed to cut the cannon itself in half.

"WAIT! WE DON'T HAVE TO DO THIS! WE DON'T EVEN HAVE THE MONEY ANYMORE!" a voice called out. It belonged to a man with shamrock tattoos on his arm. "FRANKY TOOK YOUR MONEY TO GO SHOPPING! HE IS ALREADY ON A SEA TRAIN! WE DON'T KNOW WHERE HE IS!"

"Yeah! Listen to Zambai! Please stop hurting us!" the Frankies cried out in agreement.

"Do you really think this is about money?!" Amethyst spat. "How little do you think of us anyway?!"

"WHAT?! WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?!"

"It means," Luffy started while cracking his knuckles. "That we are pissed off! You attacked my crew. We take that personally."

"You pissed the wrong people off," Sanji told them as he adjusted his tie.

"We are gonna kick your asses," Luffy declared.

"Ha! Even with your powers, you can't stop us! We are the greatest scavengers and bounty hunters in Water Seven! We still have you surrounded! Just try to bring us down!"

"YEAH! WE ARE THE UNSTOPPABLE FRANKY FAMILY!"

GWMAPT

Not long after that, the Franky House was left in ruins. The Straw Hats managed to stop the Franky Family without much effort at all. Between the power of the Gems and the strength of the humans, the Franky Family fell like dominoes. Everybody was busy collecting themselves. The lone member of the group who did not engage in combat was Peridot, who was now busy slapping a fainted scavenger in the face demanding answers. "WHERE DID YOU TAKE HER?! WHERE IS THE ONE CALLED ROBIN?! WHERE IS SHE?!"

"I...I...don't know!" the man coughed weakly. "I swear that I don't know!"

"I DON'T BELIEVE YOU!" Peridot started to shake him, causing him to finally pass out. "GAH! Why can't I get answers?!"

Sanji walked over and patted her back. "Calm down, tiger. These shitty idiots don't know where Robin-chan or their boss is. Damn it..."

"But...but I miss her! I'm worried!"

"I admit that I am worried too," Pearl admitted, wiping debris off of her shoulder. "Something is rotten in the city of Water Seven...the ship is falling apart, the money is stolen, Nami and Greg are alone on the ship, Robin is missing, Usopp is injured, and we have no idea where the kids are..."

"The kids can handle themselves," Garnet stated. "What we need is a plan."

"I'll say. I'm still angry about Usopp...I feel like that did nothing!" Amethyst muttered. "He's still hurt and we can't even tell him that we got back the money."

"I think that it is time to get back to the ship! Usopp could be in really serious trouble!" Chopper pointed out. "He needs me!"

"Agreed," Zoro nodded. It was then that the group began to notice that Luffy was by himself on top of the broken crescent moon. He was staring off into the distance, clearly deep in thought. "Yo! You

okay up there?"

He did not respond for a moment. Finally, he turned around and jumped down to their level. "I think it's time...it's time to say goodbye to Merry."

The Barrage of Emotions

Steven was having the happiest day of his life.

It was amazing to think that any day could top the last when it came to the young optimist, but this day was special. There were several moments in his life he looked back on with high regard: the first time his father let him listen to his old recordings, his first night with the Gems, the first time Lars acknowledged him, the first time he formed his shield, meeting Lion in the desert, wrestling with Amethyst as a means of bonding with her, becoming friends with Lapis Lazuli, hearing his mother's voice for the first time, any time his father told him stories about his mom, meeting Ruby and Sapphire for the first time (discounting the whole getting kidnapped by Jasper and witnessing Malachite getting dragged into the ocean ordeal), entering the Grand Line and falling on Petrea and Damian's boat, becoming a Straw Hat and meeting the crew, becoming friends with Chopper, fusing with Luffy, saving Alabasta from Crocodile, and reuniting with the crew for his birthday chief among them. But over the past two years, the ones he cherished the most were those relating to Connie: meeting her and accidentally trapping each other in his bubble, discovering his mother's armory with her, becoming Stevonnie with her, bonding with her over reading, training with her and Pearl, seeing her face when she was there to rescue him from Crocodile, and her agreeing to join him once again to the Grand Line.

But this...this day...this day was magical.

He and Connie were truly becoming inseparable. She seemed so happy to be with him, even after he worked up the courage to tell her how he truly felt about her. She saw that what he wanted was for her to be happy, and she seemed to be happy being with him. Steven knew that they were only kids, but he wanted theirs to be a story to rival that of Lisa and Arcamycarus' from the *Spirit Morph Saga*.

However, the only thing he wanted in this moment was to find the perfect mask to bring back home. As luck would have it, he found

one that would suit Connie nicely at a mask store near Dock One.

"Look, Steven!" Connie rushed over excitedly with a mask in her hand. "I think I've got the best possible choice for you!"

"Me too!" Steven smiled, quickly hiding the mask he picked up behind his back. "I think you are really gonna love it!"

"Okay, let's show each other on the count of three," Connie told him, following Steven's lead by hiding it.

"One...two...THREE!" the two shouted in unison.

As Steven pulled out his gift for Connie, his eyes widened as he got a good glimpse of her choice for him. It was a mask with two eyeholes in the shape of a pink rose. The petals made up the entirety of the mask's face. It was the perfect representation of his powers and the love his mother had for him.

In other words, it was perfect.

"Steven, this is so beautiful!" Connie grinned as she examined her own mask. It was a teal and yellow mask whose yellow markings came in at the center of her face to resemble a bird's beak. The forehead possessed an ornate, white sphere that really made the whole design work. "It kind of looks like Pearl, doesn't it?"

"I know! I picked it out because it was the same color as your dress on the first day I met you, but then I noticed the circle on the top and it was just too perfect to pass up! I mean, you train with Pearl and..."

"Steven, I love it," Connie told him. "I think that these two are quite the pair, aren't they?"

The youth nodded, trying not to blush. "Yup...they really are."

With that, the two of them put on their masks and got a good look at how the other one looked. After a moment, the two began to laugh at how silly they looked. Finally, they paid for their masks and set off to have one final ice cream cone to cap a perfect night.

As the sun started to set, Steven and Connie found a nice spot to sit

back and enjoy the view off of the water. Steven could not help but smile at seeing his best friend seeming so happy and enthusiastic. The energy was literally bouncing off of her. In Steven's mind, he could literally see her shine orange as brightly as the dipping sun and feel her happiness as if it were his own.

Nothing could take Steven out of that moment...nothing in the world...

GWMAPT

After what felt like an eternity, Usopp found himself awake on the Going Merry. The pain he was feeling caused him to barely comprehend how he got there or why he was feeling like this. However, all too fast the memories surged back in and the physical pain he was feeling was nothing compared to the regret that he felt on the inside.

He lost the briefcase he was entrusted with. He lost two hundred million berries. He damned Kaya's ship to an early grave.

It hurt Usopp to move, but he needed to face his crew. They needed to know how weak and idiotic their sniper truly was. They needed to know how much of a liability he was. They needed to know that he was sorry to be such a burden.

"Hey! He's moving!" Chopper's voice shouted from his side. Usopp turned his head around slowly and realized that nearly all of the others were surrounding him. It appeared that they were standing guard by his side. Truly they were the best and most loyal friends he could ever ask for. The only people he could not make out were Steven, Connie and Robin.

"USOPP!" Luffy shouted, running as fast as he could to hug his fallen friend. "WE WERE ALL SO WORRIED ABOUT YOU!"

"Don't grab him!" Pearl interjected, getting in between the captain and the sniper. "Just because you can bounce back after an injury does not mean that he can!"

With that, Usopp attempted to speak. He found rather quickly that he

had no voice. It pained him to talk, but he knew he had to. Unfortunately, Pearl misread his feeble attempts at getting the courage to talk as proof that he was too weak to do anything besides lying down. "See? He is clearly still very injured! Why don't we let him be until..."

Before she could finish her sentence, Usopp forced himself up and grabbed her leg (as it was the closest person he could grab onto). As he tried to support himself using her, he began to cry. "GUYS! I AM SO SORRY! I MESSED UP! I COULDN'T STOP FRANKY FROM STEALING OUR MONEY! MERRY IS DEAD BECAUSE OF ME!"

"Let...let go!" Pearl begged, trying to distance herself from the long-nosed liar.

"Usopp, you don't have to keep beating yourself up!" Amethyst told him, getting on his level while ignoring Pearl's please. "It happens! We already took care of those Franky guys for you!"

"Yo-You did?" Usopp stammered, finally letting go of Pearl. "Do we...do we have the money?"

"No," Nami explained while shaking her head. "It's gone. We are going to wait for Franky himself to get back, but we have no idea where he is going or what his intentions for our money are. The important thing is that you are okay! Seriously, why would you go fight them by yourself after being assaulted like that?! You could have gotten yourself killed!"

"It's what any of you would have done," Usopp grumbled until processing what Nami just said. "Wait, you tried getting the money back? Do we still have the other hundred million?"

"Yup!" Luffy nodded enthusiastically. "Plus we don't know what the others could bring back from that Backside place! Maybe we can get more money!"

"That's right!" Usopp allowed himself to smile. "Thank goodness. We can still save Merry...we can still save Kaya's ship."

The Straw Hats grew silent for a moment. It was clear that they knew something that Usopp did not. The silence made Usopp even more uncomfortable than the discomfort brought about by his injuries. "What? What's going on?"

"Well..." Luffy scratched his head, trying to find the right words. "Um...actually, I've made a decision. I've decided that it is time to get a new ship!"

"Uh...was that REALLY the best way to tell him?!" Amethyst asked, concerned for Usopp's wellbeing. "This was hard for everyone to hear! He already blames himself for losing the money!"

Usopp fell back to the floor. He sat there and listened to Amethyst trying to get through to Luffy, but found that he could not bring himself to utter a word. Surely he had misheard Luffy! Surely Luffy would know better than to abandon the Going Merry so carelessly.

"But it's time we accept it and move on!" Luffy argued. "If we can't do anything to save Merry, we need to consider how best to help all of us! Now, why don't we look at this magazine that the nice lady gave us before..."

"Stop it...STOP IT!" Usopp raised his voice in anger. "This is a joke, right? Are you saying that we need to say goodbye just because we don't have enough money? That's the real problem here?"

"No! That's not what this is about!" Luffy explained sharply.

"Then what IS it about, Luffy?! I am a real man! I can handle anything you need to tell me!" Usopp growled, trying and failing to stand up.

"Uh...guys? I think we need to settle down and..." Sanji tried to interject but found that the two of them were too heated to listen.

"WHY SHOULD I SETTLE DOWN?!" Usopp snapped. "OUR CAPTAIN IS ACTING LIKE AN IDIOT!"

"While I cannot argue that, he has a good reason for wanting to look for a new ship..." Pearl defended Luffy while trying to stop the argument peacefully.

"THERE IS NO GOOD REASON TO CHANGE SHIPS! MERRY IS PERFECTLY FINE!"

"MERRY..." Luffy shouted as hard as he could. "MERRY IS GOING TO DIE!"

The ship went silent. All eyes were on Usopp as he processed the terrible news. In an instant, Usopp's mind was full of a million questions. As he tried to sort them out, he could see that Luffy was talking to him. He knew that he was trying to make some kind of justification for his decision to kill their ship, but it did not matter to Usopp.

This was Kaya's ship. This ship travelled to other dimensions. This ship sailed to the sky. This ship crossed into the Grand Line. Nobody could convince Usopp that Merry could die this early into their quest to sail to the end of the Grand Line, least of all a fool like Monkey D. Luffy.

"Luffy, what are you even talking about?" Usopp asked, folding his arms. "Why would you joke like that?"

"I don't think he is getting it," Zoro whispered. "Crap."

"Usopp, this isn't a joke! The carpenters said that the ship was damaged beyond repair! They said that not even Steven could save the ship with his spit! They said..." Luffy tried to tell him again.

"What they said doesn't matter! They are only interested in money and they probably are trying to make us spend more of it! What do they know about this ship?!" Usopp retorted back. "They don't know what this ship has done! She has done more in her short life than other ships could have done in ten times that amount of time!"

"Sniper Usopp," Garnet interjected. "Please try to understand that Pirate Captain Luffy speaks the truth. There is nothing we can do for the Going Merry besides giving it a proper burial."

"Oh! That is supposed to make me feel happy? The alien rock who hardly speaks and never does anything to help says that our ship can't be fixed! What do you know about ships?! What do you know

about human culture?! What do ANY of you know!" Usopp started to freak out. "She is our FRIEND and you...you...YOU JUST WANT TO ACCEPT THAT SHE IS GOING TO DIE?! YOU AREN'T EVEN PUTTING UP A FIGHT!"

"Hey! That's not fair! We're on the same side and..." Amethyst began before getting silenced by Zoro.

"Don't. Let him get it out."

The purple Gem looked from Usopp to Luffy, her concern growing even more. However, Usopp was blind to all of that. He was blinded by rage and fury. His friends did not seem to care at all about their home...did they not even view Merry as anything but a ship? "Is that what you guys think about her?! DO YOU JUST SEE THIS SHIP AS A TOOL?!"

"Do you have any carpentry skills?! Do you have any idea of how a ship really works?!" Luffy yelled, getting angry himself. "If we push Merry too far, she will die and take us along with her! I won't risk your lives for something that can't be saved!"

"Well, I've got news for you! I am the one who repairs this ship so I am the one who will make that call!" Usopp told him with finality.

"Now, we can pick up some supplies in town in the morning and..."

"No," Luffy stopped him.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me! You are just going to be wasting the money we DO have! YOU AREN'T A CARPENTER!"

"I'M MORE OF A CARPENTER THAN YOU ARE A CAPTAIN!" Usopp sniped quickly at him. "Look at you! You are so ready to believe those assholes' bullshit that you will forsake one of our own! The Luffy I know would fight to the bitter end for his nakama! He would NEVER give up so fast!"

"Oy! Stop yelling, you shitty idiots! You both are getting out of hand!" Sanji tried once again to keep the peace, but found that it was of no use.

"Do you think I am HAPPY to make this decision?!" Luffy asked.

"No! I think that you have no idea how to be a real captain! I have horribly misjudged your character Luffy and, quite frankly, I doubt you'd be able to lead us anywhere but to a quick death!"

"Now, that isn't fair! You are letting your emotions blind you! You don't mean these things!" Garnet raised her voice. "Just breathe!"

"STAY OUT OF THIS!" Usopp snapped. "I WILL NOT GIVE UP ON THIS SHIP!"

"YOU HAVE TO! I HAVE MADE THE CALL ALREADY! WE NEED A NEW SHIP SO WE CAN SURVIVE THE GRAND LINE!"

"THE ONLY THING WE NEED IS TO FIX MERRY, BUT YOU HAVE ALREADY GIVEN UP ON HER!" Usopp had finally fully gotten on his feet, his fists clenched in anger. "YOU ACT LIKE AN INNOCENT SOUL, BUT YOU ARE JUST WILLING TO LEAVE HER BEHIND!"

"MERRY ISN'T A PERSON!"

"MERRY IS ALIVE!"

Finally, Luffy had enough. He leaped at Usopp and pinned him to the ground. His face was the angriest half of the crew had ever seen him. The Straw Hats were unsure what to do in this situation, but Zoro made a motion for everyone to remain where they were. Uneasily, everyone did just that, but it was clear that everybody was deeply concerned about this turn of events.

"WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?! DO YOU THINK YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE WHO CARES ABOUT MERRY?!" Luffy screamed.

"PROVE TO ME THAT YOU CARE! TELL ME YOU WILL SAVE OUR SHIP!"

"MERRY. CAN'T. BE. SAVED. GET THAT THROUGH YOUR HEAD OR *LEAVE*!" Luffy roared angrily.

It was in that moment that somebody finally took action. After trying

continuously to get them to calm down, Sanji proceeded to kick Luffy directly in his face. The captain flew into the wall and nearly collapsed on top of Peridot, who was hiding with Chopper in the corner in horror.

"LUFFY, YOU SHITTY DUMBASS! CALM DOWN AND THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU JUST SAID! GARNET IS RIGHT! JUST BREATHE!" Sanji demanded.

"Luffy!" Chopper gasped, trying to get him off of the floor. The captain motioned for him to back away, clearly wanting to do this by himself.

"No...no, you're right. I'm sorry, Usopp...I didn't mean it...I just got so caught up and..." Luffy began to apologize. However, Usopp was not prepared to let him get off of the hook that easily.

"No. What's said is said. That's fine, Luffy," Usopp panted in anger on the floor. "I know what you do now, Luffy. You cast aside the useless members of the crew the second they are a liability moving forward! If that's how you feel about the ship, then that's how you feel about me!"

"What?! Usopp, don't say that! Nobody is thinking that!" Nami cried out.

"They are! I don't have your smarts or their brawn or even Greg's music! What do I have to offer to this crew?! Nothing! I was fine with all of you surpassing me, because that was my place! I was the comedy relief...but even Amethyst and Steven do that better than I do! I offer NOTHING of value to this crew, and I accept that!"

In an instant, Usopp hobbled onto his feet and stormed away from the ship. Nobody stopped him as he walked off of the ship and toward the shore. Nobody, that is, except for Amethyst. The purple Gem ran after him right before he stepped on the ship. "Dude, I know this ship means a lot to you...but you mean a lot to us! You can't just leave!"

"I can do what I want...I mean, why do you even care? You Gems aren't going to stay here full-time. You have to protect your Earth...

you never would have cared about this world if not for Steven's accident!" Usopp bit his lip put his hand on her shoulder. "I know you are trying, but you know nothing about what it is like to feel like this...just let me go!"

"No! I won't accept that!" she shouted.

Usopp gave her a hard stare and then looked back to the ship. "Do you think Merry is dead?"

"What?"

"Do you think Merry is dead?!"

"I...yes! That's what they said! I was there, Usopp! I heard everything! They aren't lying to you!"

"If you aren't going to fight for Merry with me, then you are as bad as Luffy is! GO AWAY AND LET ME BE!" Usopp shouted in her face. He forcibly moved her aside and continued on his way to the shore.

As he stormed onto land, he failed to notice the tears streaming down Amethyst's face and blocked out her pained calls to him. There was only one thing left to do...one final loose end to tie up. "LUFFY!" Usopp projected his voice as loud as he could. "I WON'T CAUSE YOU OR THE OTHERS ANY TROUBLE...BUT I REFUSE TO LET YOU DESTROY KAYA'S SHIP! SINCE THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN CLAIM A SHIP IS THE CAPTAIN, I CHALLENGE YOU TO A DUEL! I CHALLENGE YOU FOR THE RIGHT TO BE THE CAPTAIN OF THE GOING MERRY!"

Once more the air grew silent as the horror of Usopp's declaration reached them. Finally, the angry sniper finished his challenge. "I WIL LRETURN AT TEN TONIGHT! THE WINNER WILL WIN MERRY...BUT NO MATTER WHAT, YOU AND I ARE FINISHED! DO YOU HEAR ME, MONKEY D. LUFFY?!"

GWMAPT

"One! Two! Three! Four! Keep it up! Two! Three! Four!" Steven and Connie marched along as happily as they could be. They had spent some time watching the sun set on the beautiful ocean and found

that it was far later than either of them were anticipating. They were a bit concerned that the others would be worried about them, but they cast those thoughts out of their minds for one final song and dance on the way back to the ship.

"We are marching to our crew, since it's the right thing we should do! What a day we've had! I am just so glad!" Steven sang to the beat of their marching.

"I am really happy too!" Connie merrily added.

"She is really happy too!" Steven responded.

The two began to laugh once more, clearly just thrilled to be alive. It was rare to find two people in such unison and feeling so overjoyed. Both Connie and Steven were so innocent and carefree that they were able to continue to view the world with childlike wonder and merriment.

And what better place to keep those feelings of joy going than the ship they have come to consider a home away from home?

"After you, Connie," Steven bowed, allowing his friend to board the ship first.

"Thank you, good sir!"

The children entered the *Going Merry* one by one and were somewhat confused to see it rather dead. There were no songs or drinking occurring...the ship was uncharacteristically quiet. It was a bit disconcerting to say the least. However, Steven would not let that last for long if he had anything to say about it.

"Steven, is it just me or is something seriously off about this?" Connie asked, looking around. "Where is everyone?"

"I don't know...maybe they are inside?"

"I've got a bad feeling about this...what should we do?"

The boy thought about it and suddenly his eyes widened. "I know exactly what to do...something to surprise them and be the perfect

ending to our day!"

Connie tried to read Steven's expression but it wasn't until Steven offered her his hand that she figured out what he was suggesting. "Really?"

"Really," he nodded. "May I have one final dance, Ms. Maheswaran?"

"It would be my pleasure, Mr. Universe."

Taking his hand, the two children did a small waltz set to the music in their hearts. Their movements were in perfect synchronization as were their minds. Two sets of thoughts merged into one as the darkness of the night was enveloped by a bright, pink glow. Where Steven and Connie once stood was a new individual...one who looked vaguely similar to both of them and yet was uniquely their own.

Stevonnie was reborn at last.

"If this doesn't liven up the place, nothing will!" Stevonnie grinned to themselves. "The guys have never met me before...what better way to tell them about our amazing day! It doesn't matter what these guys are doing; we are going to knock the socks off of them and maybe even throw a fun pirate party!"

The fusion went to the door of the kitchen and listened in. Surprisingly, they could hear a lot of yelling inside. It was not unusual on this ship, but it was usually in good fun. "You mean those shitty Frankies tried to rob the ship earlier?! Why didn't you finish them off then?!" Sanji was screaming at Zoro.

"What about you?! You went out to shop around instead of staying and guarding the ship with me!"

"I WAS DOING MY JOB!" Sanji retorted back.

"Could you clods settle down! You humans are offering no solutions to this problem! Why don't you let..." Peridot tried to interject.

"STAY OUT OF THIS!" they both snapped back.

Before things got too heated, Stevonnie chose that exact moment to open the door and make their presence known. "Everybody, stop your fighting! We're back!"

The Straw Hats, somewhat hesitantly and mistrustful, gazed upon the unknown intruder. It was clear that (outside of Peridot) the Gems were not in the room. It also seemed like Luffy, Usopp, Chopper, and Robin were not present as well, which was concerning. Stevonnie wondered where they were, but decided to focus on the Straw Hats that were in the room. Surely the sight of a fused Connie and Steven would make them excited! Maybe they would play the chopstick game again...

"Who the hell are you?" Zoro asked, still very angry at Sanji.

The fusion blinked and tried to read the room. It seemed like everyone really was just as angry and upset as Sanji and Zoro were. "I...we...are...what's going on?"

"Listen, if you have come here to pick a fight, you've picked a piss poor time!" Zoro warned them. "Get out...NOW!"

Before Stevonnie could react to the threat, a familiar face pushed their way from the back and made his way forward. "No! It's the kids! It's the kids!" When Stevonnie looked upon the face of Greg Universe, they were surprised to see just how fallen his features were. Neither Connie nor Steven had ever seen Greg so depressed and miserable. The sight of Steven's father so crestfallen was the straw that broke the fusion's back. The strength and joy that brought about their fusion had truly dissipated and, as such, caused Stevonnie to disappear from existence once more.

"Shit! What the...you two kids fused?!" Sanji asked, shocked and taken off-guard.

"How can a human fuse with a Gem...is it your half-breed nature? I have so many questions!" Peridot shouted. She tried to come forward, but was not strong enough to get past Zoro and the others.

"Yeah! We fused and had the best day ever and..." Steven began before getting trapped in a giant hug by his father.

"Where have you kids been?! We've been worried sick about you... among other things..." Greg trailed off, obviously uneasy about something.

The uneasy feelings in the room made Steven truly worried about everyone. "Dad, what's going on? Why is everybody so angry? What happened? Where are the Gems?" Steven asked, looking around the room for any sign of an answer.

"The Gems are...well, they are talking amongst themselves...that's not too out of the ordinary," Greg explained, skating around the issue at hand.

"Greg, stop beating around the bush and tell them what's going on," Zoro told him.

"Now hold on. He's my son and I'll tell him how I want to tell him!" Greg retorted.

Steven could see that his father was truly worried about his wellbeing, but he needed to know what it was that was freaking everybody out. "Dad...please. Give it to me straight."

Greg scratched his head and stared at his son. He took a deep breath and released it slowly and deliberately. "Kids...a lot has happened while you were out doing...whatever it is that kids do for fun nowadays. First...um...you didn't see Robin around, have you?"

The kids shook their heads, causing Peridot to groan in frustration. "Another hopeful lead dashed! Gah!"

"Is something wrong with Robin?" Connie asked sharply.

"No...I mean, maybe? She's missing. One minute we were having a conversation, the next she was gone."

"Then why is everyone just sitting around?! Let's get the Gems, Chopper, Usopp, and Luffy here and keep searching until we find her!" Steven punched his hand to his palm.

The Straw Hats gave him a look of pity in response to his statement, which only made Steven feel even more worried. "What am I

missing here?!"

"I...that is to say...we can't do that," Greg explained slowly and carefully. "Steven, Robin going missing isn't the biggest problem right now...Luffy and Usopp..."

"Are they missing too?!"

"Luffy and Usopp are going to fight each other in an hour," Greg finally got it out. "Luffy and Usopp are going to duel each other."

The half-Gem blinked in confusion. "...like playing a children's card game duel or pistols drawn at dawn duel?"

"It's not a game, Steven," Nami told him. "This is serious! Usopp quit the crew and is fighting Luffy for ownership of Merry."

Connie and Steven tried to process what she told them and looked to each other. Both were lost and both could not comprehend the gravity of her words. "No...no, you guys are joking. This is a prank, right? You guys are throwing a party or something...Luffy and Usopp are going to jump out and are going to make fun of us for our date, right?" Connie asked, tears forming in her eyes. "Right?"

The silence that followed was all the answer she required. "...no," she whispered before she started to cry.

For his part, Steven still could not grasp just why his two friends would fight each other. What was so important about the ship that would cause Usopp to quit the crew? A million questions were forming in his head, but only one escaped his lips: "Why?"

"Merry has lived a long and fulfilled life...but she has just reached the end of her life," Nami gently explained. "Steven, our ship can't be repaired by the shipwrights here...and these guys are the best in the world. This was the last island Merry could take us to..."

"So Merry...Merry is dying?" Steven started to shake his head. "No...no, she can't die! This was the best day I have ever had! This was the perfect day! You can't joke with me like this! Merry can't die! Merry can't die! Merry..."

As Steven started to break down in tears, Greg held him close and let him cry into his shoulder. The tears would not stop as he felt the pain coming from his heart. Yet, it was not merely his pain alone he was feeling. At once, he seemed to be able to connect emotionally to everyone in the room. It was as if he was absorbing the pain and grief of his friends...but surely that was impossible.

The pain he was feeling had to have been his own. Steven Universe was now emotionally destroyed.

"Let it out, Schtoo-ball. There's nothing wrong with saying goodbye sometimes..." Greg patted his son on the back.

After crying for a minute, Steven wiped his face and widened his eyes. "Wait! Wh-Wh-What about my spit? Maybe I could..."

"We asked them about it," Nami told him. "They explained the logistics behind it and...well, we just have to accept it for what it is. This is hard...REALLY HARD for every one of us. It's not just saying goodbye to a ship. It's saying goodbye to one of our own."

"Where's Luffy?" Connie asked, looking around after accepting a tissue from Sanji. She blew her nose and tried to hold back sobs. "Why is he fighting Usopp anyway?"

"Because Usopp is acting like a hurt child," Zoro grunted.

"ZORO!" Nami snapped. "Don't you dare!"

"The man has had his pride shattered!" Sanji grabbed him by the collar. "Cut him some slack!"

"He insulted the captain and quit," Zoro reminded them. "Personal attachment and feelings aside, he would need to do a lot of apologizing to make things right."

"BUT WHAT ABOUT ROBIN?!" Peridot wailed, causing everyone to turn and acknowledge her. "I know this altercation is concerning everyone and with good reason, but why is nobody worried about her?!"

"It's not that we aren't worried about Robin-chan," Sanji muttered

with a sigh. "This is just the immediate concern...all of this is concerning. What a shitty day."

Just then, the door opened. Steven looked over Greg's shoulder in the hopes it was Usopp. It turned out to be Chopper, walking in with his head down.

"Chopper, you're back already?" Zoro asked. "Weren't you going after Usopp to finish treating his injuries."

"He's i-i-n town ri-right now," Chopper stammered. "He fo-forced me to come back and told me that...that...we were through and for me to come back to the ship!"

Seeing Chopper break down and cry was the last straw for Steven. "THAT'S IT!" He pushed himself away from Greg and turned to leave. "I'm not going to sit here and let this day end like this! I'm talking to Luffy!"

"I'll come too!" Connie told him.

"Connie, stay here...I think I have to do this myself," Steven replied, causing Connie to stay where she was in confusion.

"Steven, what hope do you have to change his mind?! He's not the one who started this! Usopp is who you would have to convince and he isn't even here!" Nami called to him.

"Luffy is our captain. He can be the one to end it."

GWMAPT

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU WON'T END IT?!" Steven freaked out at his captain.

Steven found Luffy lying down on a hammock in the men's quarters in deep thought. Seeing this, Steven tried to convince him to call the whole thing off. He was not counting on Luffy acting distant and not really caring about the whole affair.

"You heard me. He wants it. I'll let him fight me," Luffy replied in a monotone voice.

"But you are the captain! He is your friend! You can't just fight him!"

"I can and I will, Steven," Luffy told him. "He won't fight until the death, so there's nothing to worry about."

"Violence is NEVER the answer! You guys might not kill each other physically, but you'll kill your friendship!" Steven pleaded.

"Don't you remember what I told you back before we picked up Chopper? This is what pirates do." With that, Luffy placed his hat on his head, signaling to Steven that he could do nothing to end this petty conflict.

As he left the room, Steven could not stop feeling that odd feeling he felt when the others broke the news about the ship. His pain and sadness at the seemingly unavoidable dissolution of his crew was only growing with each passing moment. He could feel Nami's frustration and fear, Chopper's depression, Peridot's concern over Robin, Sanji and Zoro's hidden guilt, Greg's concern for his son, and Luffy's...well, Steven couldn't describe it. Steven always considered himself to be an empathetic person who would do his best to comfort every person that needed it, but he had never felt so... connected to everyone as he was in this trying time.

Something was happening, and it was literally tearing Steven's heart apart.

Suddenly, he overheard the voices he needed to hear the most. In any good situation like this, Steven would look to the figures of authority in his life: the Crystal Gems.

"So, it is decided then?" Pearl was asking.

"Unfortunately," Garnet responded. "It is for the best at the present moment. When they get back tomorrow, we will take care of it. Once that matter is concluded, we will come back and..."

"Steven!" Amethyst interjected, cutting Garnet off as she acknowledged the half-Gem's presence. "Man, where have you been all day? We didn't see you or Connie once!"

"That's because we were having a date and..."

"A DATE?!" Pearl and Amethyst shrieked at once.

"Steven, you can't date Connie! I thought human protocol dictates that you do not start dating until you are at least of an adult age!"

"Who cares about that! Details, Steven! Details!" Amethyst begged.

For a moment, Steven almost forgot about the inner turmoil he was feeling, but then it hit him: they were probably trying to distract Steven from the current situation. One look at Garnet was all he needed to confirm that theory. She was smiling, clearly happy for him and Connie, but he could tell that she was distant. As such, Steven would not allow himself to relive the joy of his day and would do what he needed to do. "Guys, we need to do something about Luffy and Usopp."

The Gems looked uneasily at each other. Their ruse was cut short before it could even begin and it was very clear that Steven would not be backing down from this discussion. "Steven, it's not our place to interfere. The others have tried to and they couldn't even convince either of them to change their minds..." Garnet explained.

"But we have to! Crystal Gems always save the day! We need to save the crew from...from this anger!"

"Look, your heart is in the right place...but those guys are too stubborn to listen to reason," Amethyst added dejectedly. Steven noted the tone and realized that she was at least affected by this.

Garnet and Pearl, however, were not. He didn't know why, but he just knew that they were trying to stay out of it, with Pearl attempting more than Garnet. Steven looked to all three of them and decided that it was no use trying to talk to them. He turned around and let them be, ignoring their calls to return to them.

Steven needed to be alone for a moment...he needed to think how he could salvage this day.

GWMAPT

Usopp stood outside the Going Merry in preparation. It was time to make good on his word to save Merry from Luffy's idiocy.

How could a person he trusted so much fail him so severely? Luffy was naïve and impulsive, but he always had his heart to balance out his flaws. Usopp truly felt at home with his friends on Kaya's ship, but he could not idly sit by and let this injustice stand. The Going Merry deserved more than being cast aside like garbage the second a newer model made itself available. If nobody else would speak up for Merry, he alone would take up that duty. He owed it to Kaya and he owed it to his ship.

"LUFFY!" Usopp shouted. "COME OUT AND FACE ME! I HAVE EIGHT THOUSAND FOLLOWERS WHO WILL ATTACK YOU AT MY COMMAND! SURRENDER NOW OR PREPARE TO DIE!"

One by one the members of the Straw Hats appeared on the ship to witness the spectacle for themselves. Usopp noted that both Connie and Steven were back, which should have made him feel relieved. Instead, he felt nothing at all. He saw that the half-Gem was trying to shout to him, but none of that mattered to him. His attention was focused only on his former captain, who was walking toward him with determination in his eyes.

"Usopp, I'm fairly confident that's a lie," Luffy told him, standing his ground mere feet from Usopp. The two stared at each other and prepared for the inevitable first strike. "You look ready to do this, but are you sure you won't regret your decision later? This is what you wanted!"

"Don't try to worm your way out of this, Luffy! Your opponents tend to underestimate you, but I've been watching you for months! I know all of the places you'll break!" Usopp shouted. With that, he prepared to make the first blow. "**USOPP SPELL!** You now have razorblades between your teeth!"

Ignoring the petty attempt to distract him, Luffy jumped into action. Running forward, Luffy stretched his arm back with the intention to strike. "**GUM-GUM...**" However, Usopp started to violently cough. It was to the point that blood started to fall to the ground. Seeing his friend in such a condition caused Luffy to hesitate from attacking his foe.

"Typical Luffy," Usopp whispered with a grin. "That was a 'Ketchup

Star.' Pitying your opponent always leaved you wide-open!" Before Luffy could process this deception, Usopp pulled out what appeared to be the remains of a shellfish and pointed it toward Luffy. **"FLASH DIAL!"**

A blinding light filled the air, causing Luffy to cover his eyes. Taking advantage of this opening, Usopp grabbed his trusty slingshot and began to pelt Luffy with eggs. **"EGG STAR!"**

"Are you SERIOUSLY fighting me with rotten eggs?! Take this seriously or don't fight me at all!" Luffy shouted in frustration.

"THIS IS HOW I FIGHT!" Usopp retorted back. Just as Luffy was about to respond, Usopp fired off another shot directly in Luffy's open mouth. "Should talk with your mouth full, Luffy. Especially when you just ate my 'Tabasco Star!'"

Freaking out over the burning taste in his mouth, Luffy failed to realize that Usopp was using the conversation as yet another distraction to set up a series of small, spiked balls all over the ground. "Watch your step, Luffy! You're in 'Caltrop Hell' now! Why don't we spice it up with some shurikens?!"

Without missing a beat, Usopp proceeded to shoot several throwing stars at his former captain, unable to move without feeling immense pain due to the caltrops all around him. Amazingly, Luffy was able to dodge them. But Usopp was not out of tricks yet. While Luffy was fighting, he managed to throw out another shellfish shell to the ground. This one was slowly emitting a smoke cloud which had managed to cover the entire field.

"Finally notice the gas?" Usopp laughed. "You underestimated me just like everyone else did! Now you will suffer just like all the other souls who dared to challenge Captain Usopp! **FLAME STAR!"**

Firing off a shot from his slingshot, the battlefield erupted in a blaze of fire. The resulting blast was strong enough to rock the ship and caused the ocean itself to crash on the shore. As the smoke cleared up, Usopp looked and saw that water was dripping down Merry's figurehead. It almost looked like she was crying...crying that he was there to protect her.

The sight only doubled Usopp's courage. He would defeat Luffy right here for her right to live.

Unfortunately, Luffy would not be defeated so easily. In an instant, Luffy began a barrage of attacks on the sniper. Hit after hit struck Usopp's body. It was clear that Usopp's advantage was gone and that Luffy was taking the upper hand. Fortunately, Usopp knew this would happen sooner or later and had enough sense to bring out his secret weapon.

Slipping on another Dial, he waited for Luffy to attack him with a powerful blow and prepared to take it like the man he was. "**GUM-GUM BAZOOKA!**" This was the moment that Usopp was waiting for. Luffy's powerful fist struck him with all of his might, but the punch landed on the hidden Dial. "Thanks for the power boost, Luffy. Have some of my **IMPACT DIAL!**"

Moving in close to Luffy's face, Usopp prepared to unleash the true ability of this particular Dial. It absorbed the force of the blow that struck it and sent it back at whomever Usopp directed it at. Overjoyed that his attack landed, Usopp was eager to see just how damaged Luffy was.

To his shock, Monkey D. Luffy was still standing.

That was the best shot Usopp had at beating Luffy. He knew that he was physically superior in every way. He had to rely on trickery and his smarts to defeat him. As Usopp watched Luffy prepare to strike him one final time, he knew the outcome of the fight before it happened.

With a single "Gum-Gum Bullet," Usopp lost the duel a sad and broken man.

GWMAPT

From the edge of the Going Merry, Steven looked on in horror at the sight unfolding before him. Never before had he seen this side of Usopp or even Luffy. He knew that they had gotten into many fights before, but this...this was wrong.

"Usopp is really fast," Sanji commented. "I didn't think he could move so quickly."

"Doing so while he is that badly damaged cannot be good for his body," Pearl noted.

"We can still stop this!" Steven pleaded again. "We have to try!"

"No!" Zoro snapped. "If you can't accept that this is happening, go inside and don't watch. This is going to happen whether you like it or not!"

"But it's not fair!"

"Life isn't fair," the swordsman responded with a frown. "You've got a lot to learn about life, Steven."

"Don't talk to him like that! He's just a child!" Pearl argued.

"He's a teenager and a pirate. He can make his own choices," Zoro reminded her.

Garnet stood between the two of them before they would start another fight between members of the crew. "This not the time or place! Don't let your emotions about the present moment cloud your judgement!"

Silently agreeing, Pearl and Zoro stopped discussing Steven's wellbeing and focused their attention of Usopp shooting Luffy with throwing stars. Steven could not turn away despite wanting to. He wished he could close his eyes and write this off as a dream brought about by too much ice cream.

"Everybody down...now!" Garnet suddenly shouted.

The resulting explosion that occurred moments later showed him this was no dream. This was reality. Luffy was fighting Usopp and he could do nothing to stop it.

"WHAT THE HAY JUST HAPPENED?!" Greg freaked out. "HE JUST BLEW HIM UP!"

"Usopp used one of his Dials to surround Luffy with flammable gas...a clever trick," Sanji commented, tossing his own cigarette away.

"I can't watch this anymore!" Connie cried, going inside. His first instinct was to run and comfort her, but Steven needed to watch this for himself. He needed to see how this fight ended so he could figure out how to salvage it.

He needed to make this right.

Steven watched as Usopp fell to Luffy's final punch. He was grief-stricken, as it symbolized the final blow against their friendship. It seemed like a hopeless situation for Steven to fix, but he would try. These were his friends and he would do right by them.

"YOU STUPID ASSHOLE! THERE IS NO WAY THAT YOU COULD HAVE WON!" Luffy screamed at the fallen Usopp. He then picked up his Straw Hat and looked back at his former comrade. "You can do what you want with the Going Merry...we will get a new ship and move on...Goodbye, Usopp. It's been fun..."

As Luffy walked back to the crew, Steven clutched his gem in agony. He knew exactly how Luffy felt in this moment...flashes of red filled Steven's vision as he watched him return. Everybody on the ship was either upset beyond comparison or trying to hide their true feelings. Sanji was one such person, as he kept himself together as he stopped a wailing Chopper from tending to Usopp's wounds.

"No! Chopper, this isn't a game! Usopp lost the duel and then was pitied by Luffy! Do you understand just how this kind of act pains him?! It just digs deeper into his soul that he truly is the loser of this fight!" Sanji shouted.

Luffy began to walk on the ship, barely acknowledging his emotional crew. Pearl eyed him up and shook her head. "Look at him! He's not even crying at the loss of his friendship! What kind of a person is he?!"

"The kind this ship needs...the kind of man who can make a decisive decision and live with the consequences. If we can't trust

him to do that, then why do we follow him," Zoro told her.

"The swordsman is right. A leader needs to be objective about all of the goals for their people..." Peridot nodded weakly, alternating glances from Luffy to Usopp's fallen form. "Objectivity is a hard trait to possess..."

"And what do YOU know about objectivity?!" Pearl snapped.

"I know enough that I can't objectively make a call like that!" Peridot retorted, her eyes widening at that sudden realization. "I mean...no, I don't think I could...not anymore..."

Nobody had the time to respond to Peridot's statement as Luffy walked into the men's quarters. Steven could instantly tell that Pearl was wrong about one thing: Luffy was indeed crying. His anger had turned to grief but he knew that he had to keep a tough face for his crew. He needed to follow through with the choices that he made.

"Come on," Zoro told everybody. "Pack everything up...we should find a hotel in the city. We can never return to the Going Merry again."

"I'll get the Steven Badge," Pearl offered without hesitation. "Somebody should grab the paintings as well..."

Steven looked at Pearl and had a realization: this was not affecting her nearly as much as it should. Now that the fighting was over, she was making it seem like it was easy to just move on. He scanned the room and found that Garnet was acting very similar. It was not like it was just because they were Gems since Peridot and Amethyst both were shaken up...

Then it hit him like a ton of bricks: *they knew this was going to happen.*

"GARNET! PEARL!" Steven shouted at the top of his lungs. The sudden, unexpected cry caused everybody to turn to face the angry youth. Connie, rushing back from inside, looked on as well to make sure everything was okay.

"Steven, we are right here," Pearl told him. "We aren't going

anywhere and..."

"Is it true?!" Steven walked up to Garnet and pointed at her. "Did you know?!"

The fusion faced Steven with a nearly blank expression. That was all the confirmation he needed. "You did, didn't you?! YOU SAW THAT THEY WOULD FIGHT!"

"Yes...it was the most likely possibility..." Garnet told him.

"What?!" the Straw Hats cried out at once.

"You KNEW?!" Sanji interrogated. "What the hell?!"

Amethyst shook her head and took a step back. "No...no, Garnet... you're joking, right?"

Before a shocked Garnet could have the chance to reply, Steven found himself cutting her off. "YOU COULD HAVE STOPPED IT! YOU COULD HAVE AVOIDED ALL OF THIS IF YOU TALKED TO THEM!" Steven began to break down in a mixture of anger, frustration, and sadness.

"You have to understand that it wouldn't have worked..."

"YOU DIDN'T EVEN TRY! YOU DON'T GET TO SAY THAT!"

"Steven, calm down," Pearl said to Steven. She put her hand on his shoulder but he pulled it away. "I know you are feeling emotional after all of that and..."

"What about you?!" Steven demanded. "Did she tell you?!"

"Wha...no! I..." Pearl stuttered, caught off-guard at the verbal attack. "Steven, do not talk to me in that tone of voice!"

"NO!" Steven was actively channeling all of the rage and aggression he had been feeling up until this point and began to let it out. "IF YOU DIDN'T KNOW, THEN WHY ARE YOU ACTING LIKE THIS?! HOW CAN YOU JUDGE LUFFY'S ATTITUDE WHEN IT DOESN'T EVEN SEEM LIKE YOU CARE AT ALL?!"

"I care quite a bit, thank you very much!" Pearl started to become flustered. "You were clearly traumatized from this fight. You need to take a step back and realize what you are doing!"

"WHAT ABOUT WHAT *YOU* ARE DOING! DO YOU STILL CARE SO LITTLE FOR MY FRIENDS THAT YOU BARELY REACT WHEN ONE OF OUR OWN GETS BEATEN IN FRONT OF YOUR EYES?! I THOUGHT YOU WERE MAKING IT A POINT TO ENJOY YOURSELF HERE, OR WAS THAT ANOTHER ONE OF YOUR LIES?!"

"I have NOT been lying to you, Steven!"

"THEN DO YOU WANT TO BE HERE?!"

"NO! NO, I DON'T!" Pearl finally shouted, forcing herself to cover her mouth in horror. "I...that is to say...I have a lot on my mind and..."

"AND THEY DON'T?! *I DON'T?!!*" Steven continued to scream in a way that nobody had ever heard him before. "THIS WAS THE BEST DAY OF MY LIFE! CONNIE KISSED ME! I FLOATED IN THE AIR! WE DANCED! WE BOUGHT MASKS! WE EVEN FUSED! BUT THAT ALL STOPPED BECAUSE OF YOU!" With that, he pointed back at Garnet, who had removed her glasses. Her three eyes were regretful, but trying to keep stern. "BECAUSE YOU DECIDED TO KEEP IT TO YOURSELF!"

The tears would not stop flowing as Steven found himself crying on the floor. Connie ran over to embrace him, but was stopped by Zoro. He kept a serious face on, but Steven could tell throughout all of the emotions that kept pounding his mind like a ton of bricks that he was secretly worried.

"Ste...Steven?" Connie called from behind the swordsman.
"Please...please calm down. It's going to be okay and..."

"But it's not okay, Connie! It's not!" Steven tried to compose himself enough to face his peers. Finally, Steven stood up and looked at all of them. "Would...would you have kept this to yourself if this were Amethyst leaving? Or Pearl? Would you have cared if Garnet decided to leave the group?! WOULD YOU?!"

"Steven, you've used Future Vision before! You know how hard it is to accurately predict..." Garnet pleaded with Steven, but he was too worked up to think logically at this point.

"WHAT I KNOW IS THAT IF I SAW A FUTURE WHERE MY FRIENDS WERE HURT, I'D MAKE SURE IT DIDN'T HAPPEN! I KNOW I WOULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING!"

"I tried to tell him to be calm!"

"YOU COULD HAVE TOLD HIM ABOUT THE SHIP AHEAD OF TIME INSTEAD OF GETTING OUR HOPES UP...YOU COULD HAVE TALKED TO HIM PRIVATELY... *YOU COULD HAVE DONE LITERALLY ANYTHING!*"

The two Gems looked on in horror as Steven opened up his buttoned shirt to reveal his standard salmon-colored shirt. He proceeded to rip the star off of the shirt and threw it at them. The boy, running out of breath, started to pant. He locked eyes with the people whom he cherished the most and, frustrated more than he has ever felt before, took a breath before delivering what his heart was telling him in that moment. "Crystal Gems are supposed to save the day for everyone...not just who they think is worthy. If this is what it really means to be a Crystal Gem...THEN I DON'T WANT TO BE ONE ANYMORE!"

"WHAT?!" the Gems, Greg, and Connie shouted in unison.

"Steven, you aren't thinking rationally! That's just anger and regret! You can't just leave!" Greg asked, grabbing his hand. The youth pulled away and started to run off of the ship. "Please...don't do this to me!"

"It's not...it's not you...or Amethyst...and especially not Connie. I JUST NEED TO BE ALONE AWAY FROM THEM!" Steven shouted as the emotional teenager grabbed his mask and ran away into the depths of Water Seven. He did not look back at his friends or dared to make eye contact with Usopp. He knew that he was leaving Connie, but he couldn't face her now. This was all just too much.

It was not just Garnet and Pearl that were affecting him. Every

passing moment felt like he was getting assaulted with a barrage of emotions that were tearing him apart. He could feel the others...he could even feel their thoughts! He needed to get away from it all...he needed to figure out what to do. What was going on with him? Why did this keep happening? What was he going to do?

Finally, Steven found a spot to curl up into a ball and cry until the overwhelming assault of emotions calmed him down. Cradling the mask Connie picked out for him, Steven began to wail himself to a forced sleep.

In between sobs, Steven decided that he had experienced the worst day of his life.

The Nighttime Conversations

The morning after the duel was a hard time for Monkey D. Luffy to comprehend. He knew what had happened, had accepted what had happened, but absolutely hated that it happened. His nakama were now split-up and he had no way of fixing it yet. Usopp made the choice to leave by himself and, as such, it was up to him to settle it. If he went back and begged him to rejoin the crew, it would undermine his role as captain.

The same could be said for the loss of the Going Merry. It pained him that the ship he called home was forced to be retired, but it did little good to dwell on it longer than he had. Iceburg was right: he needed to think about the safety of his crew. It was his responsibility to his nakama and he needed to make the tough choice to make a clean break away...no matter how much it broke his own heart. That is why he and the crew needed to make the choice of what kind of ship to replace Merry with.

But the wild cards in all of this were Steven and the Gems.

Luffy expected certain members of the crew to take all of this hard, but Steven's response came out of left field. He knew that he would be incredibly upset and that he would beg to talk to Usopp, but Pearl and Garnet were an unknown variable in this. They had seriously upset Steven to the point that he actually QUIT the Crystal Gems. Luffy knew that there was no actual way that he would permanently quit the group that his mother formed, but that did not take away from his feelings. Steven was hurting and felt betrayed by his family...

As such, Luffy had to make a choice on what to do first: find a new ship, look for Steven, or talk to the Gems to see what was truly going on. How fortuitous it was that the answer to that issue made its way to him. He was on the top of a tower in the hotel the Straw Hats were staying at, contemplating all of the possible ways he could handle this, when he discovered that he was not alone. It was very early in the morning and despite knowing that barely anybody could have slept last night, he did not expect anyone to join him up

there. Imagine Luffy's surprise when two individuals joined him on top of the nearby roof...two individuals Luffy was not expecting to see.

"How could we have known that this could have happened?!" a familiar, raspy voice frantically cried.

"We couldn't...I couldn't..." another familiar voice replied, clearly trying and failing not to break down. Both of them came into view and Luffy saw one of them pace around. The two of them had yet to notice Luffy above them, so he listened in. "I thought we were doing the right thing!"

"I know, but we were wrong! Steven was right! We should have done something...ANYTHING...to make this right! Just because this will POTENTIALLY work itself out in most of the futures we saw doesn't mean that we couldn't have ATTEMPTED to do more to affect the present for our friends!"

Luffy did not have to see Ruby and Sapphire's faces to know that both of them were not mad at each other individually, but instead at themselves. Both Gems were clearly crying, but Ruby was far more vocal about her concerns than Sapphire. This was a very rare opportunity for Luffy to get to know these two and he truly wished it were under better circumstances. Garnet must have been truly shaken up if she split-up into Sapphire and Ruby.

"What could we have done? If we said that the ship probably would not be able to be fixed before, Usopp would not have believed us then either. It would have ended in a brawl that he would not have been able to come back from. He would have tried to take on that admiral himself and he would have been captured by the Marines. There was no coming back from that...you saw that too," Sapphire responded while wiping away her eye. "Every day we saw new possibilities and new chances to...to save the crew, but those possibilities were empty promises."

"Why is the future here so hard to read?!" Ruby growled in anger. "Why couldn't we see that Steven was going to leave us?!"

"I wish I knew, Ruby...I wish I knew..." Sapphire moved over to her

and began to hug her. The red Gem cried in her arms while Sapphire did her best to stay strong for the two of them. It was only then that Sapphire noticed Luffy's quiet form above them. She pulled back from Ruby and held her hand over her mouth. "Pirate Captain Luffy! I...we...didn't see you!"

Realizing he was caught eavesdropping, Luffy jumped back from his perch and landed in front of them. They were both so small that it took Luffy by surprise. He had only met them once before, but they looked so different here. They looked so...defeated. "I'm sorry...I wasn't trying to listen in. I was just up here when you both arrived."

"Why are you apologizing?! WE should be the ones apologizing!" Ruby blurted out. "You are our captain and we...we let you down!"

"We should have let you know about the visions we saw...but we made the decision to let events happen like they were supposed to!" Sapphire clarified. "Since coming to the Grand Line, our combined Future Vision...it isn't as perfected as it could be at the best of times in our home dimension...we didn't want to make you all worry for nothing!"

"But now look at what happened! We messed up and everything is going all wrong!" Ruby wailed.

Luffy regarded the two crying Gems and thought about how to proceed. Garnet was usually the voice of reason for the Crystal Gems and, as such, Steven. Yet, here these two were. They were so distraught that Luffy was starting to get even more concerned about the welfare of his crew. "You guys didn't tell us about it...to protect us?"

"Pirate Captain Luffy," Sapphire began. "I don't expect you to understand, but we see so many different futures when we are fused that it can become overwhelming. The endless possibilities that spring from even more endless possibilities...we can't always predict what the best possible choice will be. There are times where we need to follow what we think is right...and there are times where that ends up being wrong."

"GAH!" Ruby ran over and punched part of the railing, which got

sent flying into Water Seven. "WE DROVE STEVEN AWAY AND BROKE UP THE CREW!"

Watching Ruby take out her anger was hard for Luffy, but there was only one thing he wanted to ask. "You guys...you guys said that there is a chance that all of this will work out...that we will all be nakama again?"

"It is possible...but that future vanished the second Steven left. I can honestly say that I have no idea what the future holds," Sapphire told him in a dejected voice.

In a surprising move, the Gems watched as Luffy adopted a smile. "Well I can honestly say that if everything worked out in one future, then it can happen again in our future! All we have to do is make a good future and everything will work out, right?"

The two were silent as they considered Luffy's words. To be fair, Luffy was far from being able to feel hopeful in that moment. The wounds of the previous day were too fresh to ignore completely. But he was also Monkey D. Luffy, and that meant that at some point he would eventually bounce back. He owed it to the Gems to attempt to stay positive in some capacity.

"You...you sound just like her," Sapphire whispered. "It's incredible."

"Like who?"

"Rose Quartz," Sapphire commented softly.

"You mean Steven's mom?" Luffy scratched the back of his head and thought about the compliment. He could not for the life of him understand why she said that. "She was a great leader, huh?"

"The best," Sapphire responded.

"She was better than us," Ruby grumbled. "Rose was an inspiration to all of us...we are just good at punching things."

"Hey!" Luffy shot the two a hard look. "Don't say that! You guys are great leaders! The Gems look up to you and...and I do too..."

Once again, silence filled the air. It was clear that all three of them were nowhere closer than they were at the beginning of this conversation to fixing the issues caused by this fight. "Would she have been able to avoid this?"

"I can't say...she never had to deal with a situation like this," Sapphire admitted. "None of us had. To balance all of your crew and all of us...it takes quite a lot of skill, Pirate Captain Luffy."

"It doesn't feel that way," Luffy responded with a frown. "I know things will work out in the end, but getting there sucks."

The comment caused Ruby to let out a low laugh. "You can say that again."

"Do you think..." Luffy paused before making a decision in his head. In that moment, Luffy looked at Ruby and Sapphire and realized that they were looking to him to be the strong one. They were so used to figuring things out for themselves that it truly said something when they reached out for help. Garnet...both parts of her...she looked to him in a way that renewed his spirit ever so slightly:

They looked to him as their captain. They might be leaders of the Crystal Gems, but they were also Straw Hats.

"I think I'm going to let Steven get some space," Luffy decided, walking to the balcony and clutching the rails. He stared out into the night sky and sighed. "He needs time to breathe. This is a lot for him...I know he is good at bouncing back, but he's only human."

"Half," Ruby and Sapphire replied together in unison. The action caused Sapphire to slightly giggle, followed by Ruby joining in. Luffy completed the trio, glad that the conversation was at least ending on a laugh. He doubted the next conversation he would make would do so...

...which turned out to be true, for when Luffy knocked on Pearl's door later that night, he discovered that she was nowhere to be found.

GWMAPT

This was one of the worst nights of Pearl's life. It was not the WORST of her life by a longshot. That honor goes to the moment where Pearl realized Rose Quartz truly loved Greg Universe. But this was a different kind of night. She was partially responsible for causing her boy to run away. Steven was out in this world alone and upset...

And it was her fault.

Steven ran off and he was not coming back anytime soon. She desperately wanted to go and find him, but was stopped by Luffy, who told her to respect his wishes. When she began to try to argue with him about it, she was then yelled at by Amethyst...who told her exactly how she felt.

"What the heck, Pearl?! What is going on with you?! Why couldn't you have just had fun here?!" Amethyst had scolded her.

"I...how can I have fun when all of this has happened?!" Pearl had tried to shoot back, attempting to take control of the situation. "How can you even think of having fun at a time like this?!"

"Because it is what they need!" Amethyst shouted. "Because it is what I need! What Steven needs now is to breathe and to figure out this himself! What you need is to calm down and realize just what you are doing!"

That was the comment that caused Pearl to realize just how far she had fallen. The Gem was given her own room at the hotel to sulk. Amethyst was not talking to her and she couldn't even look poor Greg or Connie in the eye. The two of them were so hurt by it all and it killed her inside to know that she contributed to their pain. Nami had taken Connie to her room to try to comfort her and Greg asked to be alone himself...leaving Pearl to ponder alone in solidarity.

Suddenly, a knock came on her door. "Yo," a voice called from behind the grieving Gem's door. She did not need to turn around to know who it was.

"Go away, Zoro," Pearl told him, wiping the tears away from her eyes. "I do not feel like talking to anyone right now."

"Tough shit," the swordsman tried again. "Let me in."

Pearl wanted to argue with him, but found she had no strength to think of an argument. As such, she slowly relented and opened the door. There was Zoro, still unchanged after the events of the duel and frowning. He gave her the once-over and shook his head. "You look like crap."

"If you are here just to mock me, I suggest you leave. I am in no mood for it," Pearl warned him.

"I can tell. You look terrible and I can tell you feel terrible. This isn't the best place for you to be right now. You're coming with me," Zoro demanded.

"I'm not going anywhere!"

"That wasn't a question. Come on," Zoro told her and acknowledged the door. "Let's get some air."

Realizing that he was not going to leave and that he was technically right about being stuck in this room, Pearl weakly nodded and followed. "Are you going to tell me where exactly we are going to 'get some air?'"

"No."

GWMAPT

"...did we get enough 'air' yet?" Pearl asked in disgust. The two had, almost silently (minus Pearl asking for directions since Zoro seemed to lead them nowhere at all), walked to a local tavern called Blueno's Bar. Unfortunately for the swordsman, it appeared that the establishment was unexpectedly closed for the evening.

"Might as well start heading back...damn it! I needed a drink...I still do," Zoro grumbled. "What kind of a bar is closed at midnight?"

"I wouldn't know."

"I know you don't," the swordsman replied. "Whatever; let's just walk. I'll get a drink back at the hotel."

With that, the two began to walk around a Water Seven enveloped in darkness. It was a quiet night to be sure, but Pearl was too focused on her grief to appreciate it. Noticing this, Zoro started to rub his temples. "You really are something, aren't you?"

"Excuse me?" Pearl turned sharply.

"Look, I'm not here to absolve you of whatever guilt you have. What I want to know is what is really going on here," Zoro requested.

The Gem stopped walking and put her hands on her hips. "What do you mean by that? You dragged me out of my quarters and demanded that I..."

"I'm not talking about that and you know it," Zoro stopped and folded his arms. "Tonight has been a shitshow, that much I can agree with. But what do you have to worry about? What has got you so worked up that you can't even...I don't know...relax?"

"Steven just ran off and it is my fault! How are you not understanding that?!" Pearl shouted.

"Fine; poor wording on my part. I'm not that good at this," Zoro admitted. "What I mean is why don't you want to be here? What is causing you to act so rashly that you drove off the kid?"

"How dare you?! How dare you talk to me like this?! I will not stand to be treated so poorly by..."

"By who? By me? By a human? Guess what? I 'dare' to do this because nobody else is going to talk to you like this and I'm sure as hell not going to deal with this petty crap for the next week," he countered sharply. "Usopp needs to deal with his own shit if he wants to come back and return, but not you. I'm stopping this crap now."

Zoro motioned for Pearl to take a seat near one of the many waterways Water Seven had to offer. Flustered by Zoro's rashness, she almost refused but relented after looking at his eyes. He was not going to take "no" for an answer.

"Back when we were fighting Skinny-Glasses, you seemed

somewhat happy. You were forcing yourself to come out of your shell and to enjoy what we do here. How much of that was an act and how much of it was genuine?" Zoro bluntly asked, joining her on the bench.

"If you must know, those were my genuine feelings. Did I think that the captain was acting rash at times? Yes. But those moments searching for the Golden Crown in the cave...those were exciting and new," Pearl admitted, fighting back a defeated smile. "Steven seemed so happy and proud to see me playing along..."

"He wasn't the only one," Zoro informed her. "You need to realize that I've come to actually respect you, as shocking as that may be. You are damn good with a weapon and you put your heart and soul on the line for your team. I respect that. Good swordsmen are hard to come by in this world. But I can't respect you for what you are now! Look at yourself! Is this what the kid would want to come back to?!"

Pearl listened intently at Zoro's words and let them sink in. It was quite a bit to process, but it was surprisingly what she needed to hear. As such, she continued to listen. "We might not have known each other for very long in the grand scheme of things, but I think I've figured you out enough. You might know everything there is to know about the world of Gems or whatever crap you want to call it, but you don't know this place. You don't know this world and its people...but I think you want to. I value and respect many things, and loyalty is one of them. I think you're hiding something... something that isn't letting you let go as much as you would want."

"How is it possible..." Pearl began after a moment. "That someone who has such a poor sense of direction could be so perceptive?"

"The hell if I know," Zoro shrugged. "Look, I don't care if you tell me what's going on with you, but I want you to at least own up to the fact that there is something causing this...whatever this is."

"It's just that...when Steven asked me if I wanted to be here now, it was true. I don't currently want to be on the Grand Line now! It's like I told Luffy before that whole Golden Crown business started. The Cluster is incubating in our planet and we need to destroy it. I find

myself being able to distract myself time and time again with small things to keep me from thinking of it, but today has been too much. Garnet might be able to handle it...but I can't," Pearl broke down, tears starting to form again.

"All of this over the loss of the ship?" Zoro raised an eyebrow.

"No! I mean...I told Luffy that the ship was in quite poor condition when I examined it, but never did I dream that..." Pearl started again before shaking her head. "I weep for the ship, truly I do. There has just been a lot of..."

"A lot of what?"

"Today, Garnet and I bought a newspaper...and I am not sure what to do. Everything I thought I knew is being thrown out the proverbial window and I find myself completely wishing for some semblance of normalcy!"

"All of this...is over a newspaper. You're kidding me!" Zoro shook his head as he tried to wrap his mind around it. "What the hell did you read?! Was it your own obituary or something?!"

"It's hard to explain...but Garnet and I think that we might not be the only ones from our dimension here," Pearl told him. "We can't be certain until we go out and look for her ourselves, but unless there is a Devil Fruit out there that can control water, it means that Lapis Lazuli has been here or, more accurately, Malachite..."

"That's the monster-thing you showed us at Steven's house...the fusion that can control the ocean, right?" Zoro nodded, vaguely remembering the conversation.

"Precisely."

"Why the hell would a newspaper make you think she was here? How the hell COULD she have gotten here?"

"It was the report that the pirate with the stick told us about, the one with the Baroque Agents at sea. It did not seem natural to either Garnet or myself," Pearl elaborated. "But as for how, I have no idea. Garnet can't see that far into the future here...her Future Vision is

not as reliable here as it is at home apparently."

Zoro rubbed his jaw and thought about it. He looked to the Gem and could tell that the talking was at least making Pearl seem somewhat less guarded despite wiping away more tears. "So that's the story. You can't relax until you know that your planet is safe so you can go monster hunting on the off-chance your hunch is correct, right?"

Pearl allowed herself a chuckle. "It sounds silly when you put it that way. But I have my reasons to worry. That...horrible man told us only to use the Steven Badge in times of great need. What if we use it and cannot return back here? What if we doom your world to death and destruction? What if..."

"Pearl, I may not be the best at this crap, but I do know this: things tend to have a way of working themselves out if you give them enough time. If you focus too much on the crap that gets in your way, you'll never make it to where you need to go. If I focused on every little person I ever got into a fight with and let them consume me, I'd never be on Mihawk's level. You won't be in any condition to save your world if you don't focus on your priorities."

"You...you mean Steven?" Pearl gently asked.

"Right in one. You know his little song, the one he never stops singing? He says that your world believes in the Crystal Gems, and last on that list of Gems..."

"...is Steven," Pearl sighed.

"Bingo. You need to talk to Steven about this stuff. If this is the stuff that you and the Gems are concerned about, let him in. He's one of you and deserves to know what you know. I know you didn't ask for my opinion, but I'm telling you anyway. He and the rest of us still think that you are clinging onto whatever superiority complex you had over us when we first met you," Zoro told her.

"I did NOT have a superiority complex!" Pearl looked offended.

"Pearl, you made it VERY clear that you thought Gems were inherently stronger than us 'mere humans.' You can't even deny

that!"

"I...but..." Pearl stammered, realizing just how right he was.

"Again, I get it. People like Greg and your mayor aren't exactly powerhouses compared to you. But time and time again your opponents here showed you just how strong they could be and it took an admiral to get you off your high horse."

The Gem was silent and considered his words. She then buried her head in her hands. "Is that how you all view me: a prideful Gem on a high horse?"

"I can't speak for the others, but I doubt it. I'd call you more eccentric than anything, but that's how you used to be those first few days."

"It's just so hard..." Pearl revealed. "It's hard to change an outlook you have had on life for millennia in a few weeks. Everything is different now...and I don't know what to do."

"You can act like the confident Pearl that I first met!" Zoro snapped. "Change will happen whether you are prepared for it or not. If you weren't prepared for today, how do you think Steven is feeling?! From what he has told us, that kid has dealt with a lot of crap and yet manages to be even happier than our captain at times. If he can move on with things, you can too."

"...so you're telling me I should find Steven and make this right."

"I'm not telling you to do anything, but do you want my suggestion? Talk to the others first. They deserve to know. Let Steven sort out his own shit for a bit. He'll come back around, but you can't force it. He needs time to process everything."

"I suppose you are right..." Pearl sighed. She then got up and bowed. "Thank you, Roronoa Zoro. You are far more perceptive than I gave you credit for."

"Please. Somebody just needed to tell you to knock it the hell off. That's all this was," Zoro shrugged it off and got up. "I'm going back to the hotel to get drunk. Any desire to join me?"

"I'll pass...but thank you for the offer," Pearl allowed herself to smile.
"I've got a lot to think about before morning."

"Whatever you say...prude."

"Ruffian!"

"Stuck-up!"

"Mongrel!"

With that, the two returned back to the hotel, trading playful insults at each other. It turned out that this was exactly what Pearl needed as her first step to make things right. There was still quite a lot to be done, but that was fine in Pearl's eyes. She had a lot of growing to do, but at least she was perceptive enough to accept it.

She was not perceptive enough, however, to hear a muted gunshot in the heart of Water Seven...

GWMAPT

The next morning, the Straw Hats slowly found themselves beginning to leave their rooms around the same time. It was quickly apparent upon looking at any of them that they either did not get any sleep the night before or their sleep was brought about due to sheer exhaustion. None of them looked lively, but that was to be expected.

Nami had made the decision to take Connie into to the city to grab a quick breakfast for the crew since Sanji was nowhere to be found. This was a good way for the navigator to pick her brain a bit more. The young girl was not really up for much discussion the night before and it worried Nami quite a bit. She knew that keeping negative feelings deep down would not be healthy for the young girl.

"So...did you get any sleep last night?" Nami asked.

"A bit...not enough..." Connie muttered.

"Worried about Steven?"

"Of course I am!" Connie exclaimed, seemingly a bit offended. "Why

wouldn't I be?"

"I'm just checking in...I'm worried about you," Nami told her. "You guys aren't exactly used to a big blowout like this. I mean, we aren't either, but you are only twelve."

"Does that really mean anything in the long run?"

"I suppose not," Nami sighed. "If it makes a difference, I'm sorry that all of this ruined your special day yesterday."

"It's not your fault that literally everything around us fell down like... like dominoes or something!" Connie clenched her fist and then released it, giving a worrying glance down at herself. "This is just so frustrating! My first kiss will forever be overshadowed by...well, this!"

"My god! I totally forgot that Steven said that!" Nami looked floored. "That's not even getting into how you fused with him!"

"Yeah...I can see why you guys would..." Connie bitterly replied. It was then that she adopted a look of sadness on her face and started to cry. "I'm sorry, Nami! I don't mean to sound so upset and dismissive, but all of this was just so..."

"Shh..." Nami put her arm around her and let her cry. Surprisingly, the denizens of Water Seven were paying them no mind, as most were engrossed in their newspapers and were too busy talking amongst themselves. They all seemed to be worried about something, but Nami kept her focus on the grieving girl. "This was just a terrible situation; nobody can deny that. But look at you! You and Steven had the one good moment of the day! You two shared something none of us have experienced. You might be only kids, but you guys make a cute couple..."

"He's out there right now...upset and hurting..."

"We will find him soon enough. Right now, think of it this way: he would be even more upset if he knew how you were feeling," Nami pointed out. "You can't let it consume you like this."

"I know...but it's hard!"

"Yes, it is hard. That's why we are going to distract ourselves for now and get breakfast. I'm sure Luffy will want to go address our ship situation and then...well, hopefully Steven will be feeling good enough to talk this out."

"Something wasn't right with him...and I don't think it is just because of the duel or even the Gems," Connie thought about it. "He looked like he was really hurting. He never did that when at home."

"I never saw him do that when he was here either," Nami admitted. "Just chalk it up to another thing you two can talk about."

"I suppose so..." Connie ruffled her hair. "I guess I need to be strong, right?"

"That sounds like a good idea to me," Nami smiled. "So...fusion, eh? What's it like?"

"It's just so...wonderful!" Connie allowed herself to grin. "Being Stevonnie is one of the greatest feelings I have ever felt!"

"Well, when all of this settles down, you two need to tell us about it. Until then, I'm thinking bagels will suffice. Any objections?"

"My mom doesn't usually let me eat bagels. She says they are quite unhealthy...but I think that desperate times call for desperate measures!" Connie said with a wink.

Nami gave her a big smile. "That's the Connie I remember. Now then, let's get enough for all of us and twice that for Luffy. He'll probably need something to tide him over until later."

When they walked into a small shop, they were bombarded with frantic discussions among the patrons inside. All of them were intently staring at newspapers and freaking out as loud as they could. The two ladies had no choice now but to listen in and hear just what all the commotion was about.

"How could they have shot him?!"

"He can't die! Iceburg can't die!"

"This is the work of that bastard Franky! It has to be!"

"Is it retaliation for whatever happened to the Franky House?!"

"WE NEED TO KNOW!"

"Hold it! Iceburg...you mean the nice mayor?!" Nami tried to asked the people over the crowd. "What happened?!"

"Read this!" a random person shoved a newspaper into Nami's hands and the navigator quickly scanned its contents. In an instant, she knew the full story.

"What's going on, Nami? Who is Iceburg?" Connie asked, concerned about the state of the patrons.

"He is the mayor of Water Seven and the head of the shipwrights around here...this is bad! The city is going to be in a state of panic!"

Connie's eyes narrowed and looked around. "This...this can't be a coincidence!"

"What?"

"Think about it! The mayor getting shot, the duel, the money getting stolen, Robin being missing, Steven running out...there is something rotten in the state of Water Seven," Connie told her. "There has to be some connected reason about why so many bad things are happening all in one day!"

"Maybe you're on to something," Nami nodded frantically. "We need to talk to the crew and tell them what is going on!"

"What about the bagels?"

"Forget the bagels! Did you see the pandemonium in there?! We are needed at the hotel!" Nami grabbed Connie's arm and started to run back to where they came from.

After a short sprint, they returned to the hotel and started bolting up the stairs. It was clear from the street level that there were figures on the roof. Nami and Connie silently agreed that it had to have been

the crew. Opening the door to the roof revealed that they were correct. However, the surprising part was not that they were there, but that Pearl and Garnet (who was without her sunglasses) were in the process of addressing all of them.

"Guys! We have a serious..." Nami had started before getting startled by their presence. "Am I interrupting something?"

"Oh! Nami...and Connie..." Pearl gulped, looking at her pupil and adopting a depressed look on her face. "It is good that you arrived when you did. Garnet and I have been talking and we decided that we each have something to say...if you would let us."

"I mean, we have some very important..." Nami began before getting stopped by Connie, who grabbed her arm and squeezed. It was clear that the girl desperately wanted to hear what the Gems had to say and, for her sake, Nami relented. "It can wait. What is going on?"

"The past night was a time for serious reflection...and we did not like what we saw," Garnet began. "I should have told you all about the potential futures I saw, but I did not tell you for good reasons."

"Like what?" Amethyst angrily asked. She was clearly not in a good mood whatsoever. She was standing near Greg, who looked like he was hit by a truck. The man clearly did not get any rest and was sullen beyond all reason. Nami had never seen such a jovial soul broken down so much.

To be fair, the rest of the crew was not doing well at all. Sanji had finally returned from his little expenditure and it was clear he was out all night, Chopper looked like he had only just stopped crying a few hours before, and Peridot just stared out into the city. The only two who looked somewhat normal were Zoro and Luffy, though Luffy was uncharacteristically silent. He was listening to the two of them intently, but it was clear that he was still in deep thought over the previous night.

"My Future Vision is somewhat limited here...I cannot get a good grasp on what could happen until it is right in front of me. I can only get glimpses of what could potentially be coming, but even that is

not as precise as it could be. Some of those futures were good... most of them ended badly for us. I wanted to protect all of you in case things worked out, but that was clearly the wrong answer. For that, I apologize to each of you for letting you down," Garnet proclaimed to the collective.

She paused and regarded everyone. Nami could see that she was attempting to find the right words to describe her feelings. This was clearly something Garnet was not used to and she could see that Luffy was hanging on every word. "If we are all Straw Hats, then we all should act like Straw Hats. From now on, if I see a scenario that should warrant your appraisal, I will do just that. I am still learning to be more open with these things...and I do not expect you to forgive me just yet. What's done is done and time will be required to truly forgive. But I hope that we can move past this and begin a good future, but not one of Crystal Gems and Straw Hats; rather, one of a truly unified crew. It is what Steven would want...and what I want as well."

"So now you are concerned about what Steven wants," Amethyst frowned. The Gem's body language showed just how upset she was at the situation. "That's rich."

"Come on, Amethyst! Garnet seems really sincere about this!" Chopper defended the Gem. "I think that was beautiful, Garnet."

"Thank you, reindeer-doctor. That means quite a bit to me," Garnet replied with a smile.

"Don't try to compliment me, you asshole!" Chopper tried to hide his true feelings about the comment.

"I suppose that makes sense when you put it like that..." Sanji commented, taking a drag of his cigarette. "It's still a shitty situation, but I get it."

"You still should have told us," Amethyst folded her arms. "Steven was right on that front. Things might be bad, but..."

"...but nothing. She did it and she apologized. She's accepted that her actions were not the best and she vowed to do better in the

future," Zoro cut her off. "We've all done it."

"True as that may be, she is right. I should have been more mindful of my actions. I just hope that we can salvage this mess and grow into the crew that I know we can become," Garnet replied.

"Ugh," Amethyst shook her head in anger. "That's not going to change what happened! Steven ran off and is probably sad and stuff! Why aren't we doing anything about that?! We gave him all night!"

"Steven will come to us when he is ready," Pearl told her. "We might not like it...but it's what Steven needs."

"You don't get to talk!"

"Amethyst," Luffy called to her in a stern voice. "Let her speak."

"I...but...fine," Amethyst relented, glaring angrily at Pearl. "This had better be good."

Pearl glanced over the crowd and saw that she had their full attention. Before she could even start talking, tears began to flow down her face. "I'M SO SORRY!" Pearl wailed as loudly as she could. "I DIDN'T MEAN TO HURT YOU ALL!"

"Dial it back a bit," Garnet nudged her.

Taking a moment to catch her breath and regain her composure, Pearl began again. "Over the course of my time with you all, I will admit that it was hard for me to find my place. This adventure and excitement...it is not my typical cup of tea, to borrow the phrase. However, the last week-and-a-half has been just so...fun! I am truly finding myself having a good time here. But I can't allow myself to fully enjoy myself, and I believe you all should know why..."

The Gem looked to Garnet, as if to ask for her approval. Garnet nodded and Pearl allowed her gemstone to project an image of Peridot playing around with Steven back at the beach house. Steven was inside of a cardboard box colored like the Earth and Peridot was hitting it with a flyswatter. "You all know that prior to our return to the Grand Line, we were facing a crisis with the Cluster preparing

to destroy the Earth. It is hard to fully let go when your planet can be destroyed any time now. We have no way of knowing just what is happening on Earth right now, and that scares me."

"It's okay, my beautiful Pearl!" Sanji ran up to try to make her feel better. "We will be there to help you stop that Cluster! I will never allow it to destroy a world that hosts such beautiful Gems like you!"

"Oh please!" Amethyst interjected. "We knew all of that already! I have been worried and I'm fine! Steven was worried and he was fine...until you both broke his trust!"

"Amethyst, that's not fair!" Connie spoke up. "Steven knew that Pearl was hurting about this! He was hurting too!"

"But that's what I am saying! Steven could find the fun in anything!"

"But Pearl isn't Steven!" Connie retorted.

"I know..." Pearl tried to regain control of her speech. "I know I'm not as strong as Steven. I truly wish I was, but I know my limitations. There are things that Garnet and I found out that we think you should know...but we aren't entirely sure what it means."

"What are you even talking about?!" Amethyst angrily barked.

"We think Malachite is here! There! I said it!" Pearl threw up her hand in frustrated defeat. She then allowed her gemstone to project a familiar image of a giant monster with four eyes and four hands. "We think she is responsible for the disappearances of those Baroque Works ships!"

Silence fell upon the roof as the Straw Hats processed exactly what Pearl meant. It was Amethyst who spoke first, shaking her head. "No. No. No. That is impossible! How the hay could she have gotten here?!"

"I don't know!"

"So what would she even want?"

"I have no idea!" Pearl pointed to the image. "I have no idea why or

how she would be here...but that's what has been worrying me! That's why I didn't want to be here! That's why I said what I said... that's what drove Steven away from us."

"It's true, Amethyst," Garnet nodded. "We were moments from telling you about it last night."

"That's why you were insisting that we returned back to the beach house when chocolate-girl and the others came back? I...this is madness! Tell me this isn't crazy!" Amethyst freaked out.

"This is the Grand Line...anything can happen," Peridot whispered, not even acknowledging the image. "That's what Robin would have said..."

"I...gah! This is making my gem hurt!" Amethyst ruffled back her hair. "I'm sorry, but this is just too much. I'm just so angry and worried that I don't know what I am feeling!"

"I understand, Amethyst...you are just as worried about Steven as we are, and for that I am so sorry. But for now, we need to look forward, right? Everyone...I have a request of you," Pearl asked the group, who were now mostly shocked at the implications of a giant fusion capable of controlling the ocean somehow appearing on the Grand Line. "The Crystal Gems have a responsibility to protect the planet from the evils of Homeworld...so I request that this be the last island on our trip before returning home. The captain had already told me that he would try to help us get materials to build our...'Clusterbuster,' but I know that won't be enough. Could...could you come with us? The Crystal Gems need their entire team...and I truly consider you to be a part of the team..."

"Do you mean that?" Luffy asked, his voice somewhat monotone yet hopeful at the same time. Nami tried to read her captain, but it was hard. He was clearly still conflicted with emotions about Usopp and Merry, yet he knew that Pearl was imploring him and the others to understand her point of view. Though she did not personally agree with Luffy and Usopp's actions the night before, she felt proud to be a member of a crew where the captain would attempt to put his own emotions aside for the betterment of others.

Pearl wiped away the tears streaming down her face and nodded. "I do, Captain Luffy. I have pledged my services to you already and I stand by that. The odds are truly against us. It won't be easy to stop the Cluster and Malachite, but we don't have to do it alone..."

"Then I guess our next stop after we get our ship and find Robin will be to kick the Cluster's ass," Luffy gave a smile, forced yet genuine. He extended his hand to Pearl, who accepted it and found herself sobbing into his arms.

"Thank you...thank you! I am so sorry for any grief or mistrust that I caused you!" Pearl wailed.

"We aren't the ones you need to talk to," Luffy told her. Pearl stopped crying and regarded him. "We aren't the ones who were hurt by your actions...at least not all of us."

The Gem knew exactly who he was referring to and walked over to the one person who had yet to say a word...the one who needed encouragement more than anyone. "Greg...what can I say that hasn't been said? Steven..."

"...is hurting more than I have ever seen him," Greg finished her thoughts for her in a hoarse voice. "Do you know how hard it is to see my boy like that? It killed me when he was lost and it's killing me that I'm not there for him."

"What would you have me do, Greg? What can I do to make this right?" Pearl begged.

"Let Steven come to you...he's the one who is affected the most in this right now," Greg sighed and rubbed his own eyes, trying to see straight.

"That's not what I'm asking," Pearl corrected herself. "What I mean is...what can I do to make this right by you?"

The man thought about it and shook his head. "Don't worry about me, Pearl. I just need to know my boy is safe."

"Maybe you should get some rest, Greg?" Nami suggested. "You don't want Steven seeing you like this, right?"

"That's a wonderful idea," Pearl quickly nodded. "Perhaps...perhaps when you wake up from one of those 'nap' things I hear so much about, you can be the one to look for Steven? He doesn't know where we are lodging, right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I think I'm going to do that," Greg nodded and slowly got himself up. "Leave it to dear old dad to save the day, right?"

"I can think of no better person to search for him...well, almost any person," Garnet commented, her eyes finding Connie's.

Picking up Garnet's suggestion, Connie nodded. "I think that I'll stay too...but wait! There's a problem that you guys don't even know about!"

"Damn it; what now?" Sanji rubbed his head. "I don't think I can handle any more of this shit."

"We were out in town trying to get breakfast and...and we learned that Iceburg was shot!" Nami composed herself, getting back on track. She handed the newspaper she received over to the crew.

"Iceburg? You mean that ship-guy?" Amethyst asked, now more interested than annoyed. "He's like a big deal here. Who would want to hurt him?"

"We don't know! The whole city is in a panic!"

"It's going to be hard to find Steven in all of this...and this doesn't even take into account the fact we still don't have a ship," Garnet folded her arms. "This is not good."

"We needed to talk to the old man today anyway," Luffy said as he started walking to the door. "I'm going to go see how he's doing."

"Wait! You can't just go alone! I'm coming too," Nami told him.

"We should join along as well," Garnet commented, acknowledging the Gems. Pearl gave a nod and Amethyst just folded her arms. It was clear that their speech was not quite enough to make her forgive the broken trust that Pearl and Garnet left her with, but she was invested enough in seeing the completion of a new ship to join

their company.

"If you guys are going to look for this 'Iceburg' guy and these two are going to look for Steven, then I'm going to search the town for Robin. Peridot? Chopper? Moss-head? You guys coming with me?" Sanji asked, discarding his finished cigarette.

"Sure!" Chopper nodded.

"I'll pass. Perhaps splitting up will yield a higher chance of locating Robin before the day is done. I will follow the captain around...if he does not mind?" Peridot asked, giving Luffy puppy-dog eyes.

"That's fine with me," he nodded. "What about you, Zoro?"

"I'm gonna stay here and see what happens. For now, I'll watch over Greg and wait with Connie. I'll figure it out from there," the swordsman told the rest of them.

"Then we have a plan. While we are out, we'll try to find out when the sea train comes in so we could figure out when the others are getting back. We'll figure out what to do next by the night's end," Luffy told the crew.

Though shaken, the Straw Hats agreed. It was clear that there were still hard feelings from Amethyst toward her fellow Gems, but their words were the beginning of the healing process. With Steven and Robin missing; Damian, Petrea, and Genevieve returning; and Usopp and Merry no longer official members of the crew...things were only going to go from bad to worse. As they began to part ways, a loud blaring announcement could be heard throughout the island:

"THE WATER SEVEN WEATHER FORECAST HAS DECLARED AN AQUA LAGUNA WARNING FOR THE ENTIRE ISLAND. BE SURE TO MOVE TO HIGHER GROUND."

GWMAPT

The first sea train of the day pulled into Water Seven amid a time of panic. The city was collectively freaking out over the attempted assassination attempt on Iceburg's life. Everyone on the island had

been made aware of it...

Including Franky: the head of the Franky Family and the former passenger on the sea train. His distinctive face was covered by one of the many masks that were seen throughout the city the day before. He was joined by two women with square-like hair. The lone difference between the two was the fact that one's hair was slightly curlier than the other's. The three, though detested by the citizens of Water Seven, were just as shocked as they were to hear about their mayor. However, the shock of learning about Iceburg was nothing compared to the shock they received when they returned home to their base of operations.

"Kiwi...Moza...I'm dreaming, right? This is not our Franky House..." Franky asked the nearly identical sisters that followed him around when they came across the battered remains of the former stronghold.

"You're not dreaming," the girl with the curlier hair replied. "This is..."

"...terrible!" the other sister finished the other's thoughts.

Franky looked down at the rubble and saw that several of his loyal Franky Family followers were passed out and wounded, stuck under the fallen structure. The sight of human life being left out like broken dolls after a night of play caused Franky to rip off his mask and tighten his fist. "DAMN YOU, STRAW HAT! IS THIS IS YOUR REVENGE?! YOU DARE TO DESTROY MY LIFE LIKE THIS?!"

"Big...Big bro! It's you!" the weak voice of Zambai called to him. Franky whipped around and saw several injured members of the Franky Family hobbling toward him.

"You guys made it out?" Franky asked him.

"Barely! Those pirates...they are crazy strong! Some of them aren't human, I'll tell you! You've gotta avenge us, bro!" a battered and bruised Zambai pleaded.

"Do you know where they are?"

"We watched them leave a hotel they were staying at not too long

ago...I can't speak for some of the crew, but I think Straw Hat is headed toward Dock One."

Franky gave one final look to his pleading men and to the ruined house they called home. Anger surged up inside of him and, as such, there was only one response the man could give to comfort them all:

"Super!"

The Number One Super-Guy

Waking up was the hardest thing Steven Universe ever had to do.

It was odd at first. Awoken by a large explosion on the other side of the island, the youth was momentarily confused as to why he was not surrounded by his loved ones on the ship or even curled up in the family barn. When realization dawned upon him about just where he was and what had happened the night before, Steven nearly passed out again. Finally, he collected himself and tried to breathe.

"What...what was happening to me last night? How long have I been here?" Steven asked himself. He stared down at his hands and then wiped away tears from his eyes. The red, tear-stained eyes fell upon his ripped undershirt, filling his heart with sorrow. "What did I do?"

He thought hard about the exact events that took place. Everything up to the duel between his captain and Usopp was fresh in his mind. From his first kiss to his first float in the sky, those were positive moments that he knew that he would try to hold onto over the course of the day. It was the later part of the night that bothered him. Obviously there was quite a bit to deal with in regards to his anger at Pearl and Garnet, his sympathy with Usopp's depression about the dying Going Merry, and his frustration at Luffy's determination to not forgive Usopp. He would try to fix those problems in time, but what was concerning him the most was not just WHAT happened but how he FELT when it happened.

"Okay, Steven...we can figure this out," Steven assured himself. "Maybe it's normal for a growing half-Gem boy to be able to...I don't know what to call it!"

He sat down on the grass where he had run to. He found himself near the water not too far away from a giant scrap yard. He was somewhat close to the Going Merry, but he couldn't bring himself to see just how close he was yet. He needed to figure this out for himself before he did anything. He put his head back on the grass and stared at the sky, looking at the clouds go by as he spoke aloud with himself.

"I could feel everything they felt. I could hear every tear drop from their face. I could...wait," Steven said before sitting back up. "Luffy... I could see his anger turn his...aura, I guess...red...and even Connie earlier glowed orange when we were watching the sun...it was just like when I found Noko on that island, except his aura was blue..."

He thought back to earlier in his adventure when he was lost in the woods without part of his memory. The half-Gem had tried hard to listen for his friends, but had instead picked up on the faint glow of a fearful youth being controlled by a Corrupted Gem. Everybody was so caught up with the fallout of the fight with Admiral Aokiji that he had forgotten to ask the Gems about it. Still, yesterday's events did not give him faith that they would even tell him if this was something Rose Quartz could do or not.

"So...is that what I can do? Can I feel people's emotions...and see them as colors? How does that even work? Why is this Gem stuff always so confusing?!" Steven groaned in frustration. "It doesn't even matter...colors aren't going to fix this. Even if Genevieve used her Color Traps, it wouldn't be permanent and it wouldn't be what everybody really felt."

For several moments, Steven laid himself on the ground and tried to clear his thoughts. It was hard for him to do, but he eventually found himself significantly calmer than before. He focused on the wind, which was growing stronger than yesterday, and tried to empty his mind. Before he could begin to think about proceeding any further, he realized that he had not eaten since his date with Connie. "Think first; eat later," Steven told himself. Eating can be my reward for bringing the crew back together. Yeah...that's a good idea."

Even more minutes passed and Steven kept trying to think of new solutions. "Convince each of them to play a game against me and make the prize staying friends? No...what if I lost? That would make me their enemy!" With that, his stomach began to rumble again. Once more, he ignored the aches and kept his focus on his big problem.

"Think first; eat later. Think first; eat later. Think first; eat later..." Steven repeated over and over. "Think first; eat later. Eat first; think

later. Eat first; think later. Eat...wait, that's not right...or maybe it is?"

Standing up, Steven adjusted his shirt and sighed. "Do I even have any money?" Ruffling through his pockets, Steven discovered he still had quite a bit of berries left. The sight of the money only intensified his hunger. Finally, he threw his hands up in defeat. "You win! Eat first; think while I eat!"

GWMAPT

The mood of the Straw Hats riding on their bull-pulled boat was awkward to say the least. Luffy was still somewhat somber about yesterday's ordeal, although he was a bit better than earlier in the morning. Amethyst was deliberately ignoring Pearl and Garnet, hurt by their actions against Steven and the others. Pearl and Garnet each were both regretful of the night before and had barely spoken a word. Peridot was too busy looking around the streets by Dock One, presumably to search for the lost Robin and Steven.

This left Nami as the odd-woman out, as she was just focused on accomplishing their next mission: see the newly shot Iceburg and discuss options for procuring a new ship to replace the dying Going Merry. Unfortunately, that was shaping up to be an impossible task as the entirety of the city was mobbed by concerned citizens that were worried about their mayor.

"It's insane to think how many people are out here right now," Nami commented, hoping to break the tension somewhat slightly.

"Yeah, Icepops seemed like a great guy," Luffy nodded, focused on moving ahead more than conversing. "We've got to find a way to see him."

"...did you just call Iceburg 'Icepops?'" Nami raised an eyebrow.

"For the record, I think it's a great nickname," Amethyst commented.

"Yes! I too think it is an appropriate name!" Pearl awkwardly interjected, causing Amethyst to roll her eyes and fold her arms in frustration. Pearl noticed this and lowered her head in shame.

"...can this please not be a thing while we are out?" Nami asked the

Gems. "I know you all are hurting, but is this really going to help out things? We need to focus on what's going on now, not dwell on what hurt us before."

"Yeah...fine...whatever..." Amethyst grunted, clearly just trying to be done with it.

"This is getting us nowhere," Peridot stood up. "We need to find this human, correct? Allow me to expedite the process....HEY! YOU THERE!"

The green Gem shouted to another person passing by on a bull. Taken back to be addressed in such a way, he did not respond at first. Once he realized he was indeed the one Peridot was talking to, he stopped his ride right next to theirs. "Uh...yes, little green lady? You're talking to me, right?"

"I am, human. Can you please assist us in going to see the once called 'Icepops?' We need him to build us a seafaring vessel and time is of the essence," Peridot explained.

"She means Iceburg," Nami sighed, her cheeks glowing red with embarrassment.

"...I gathered that," the man replied. "Still, if you want to see Iceburg, you are out of luck. Look around you. Everybody and their mother wants to check in on him. The only people being allowed into Dock One are reporters and the members of Galley-La."

"This sucks! What are we going to do to get in now? Shapeshift into reporters?" Amethyst asked, adopting the appearance of an old-style news reporter.

"That wouldn't work and you know it," Nami sighed. "We are just going to have to wait until this blows over. We are stuck here for a week anyway."

"Which means we can focus on finding Steven when an appropriate amount of time has passed," Garnet added.

"Do you know where he could be?" Nami asked her.

"No...I am not particularly trusting of my Future Vision while I am here at the present moment. It is just too unpredictable," Garnet replied. "While it has worked more times than it failed me, this whole situation has reminded me not to be overly reliant on the future. Things will happen when they happen."

Before Nami could comment on Garnet's viewpoint, an odd sound filled the city. It was an upbeat rhythm that slowly turned into a drumbeat. The Gems and pirates began to look around to find the source of the sound, but it became readily apparent that the citizens of Water Seven were all too familiar with it. Fear showed on their faces as they started to worry.

"That sound! That rhythm!" the man who Peridot called over freaked out. "Oh no! It can't be him!"

"Uh...is this normal?" Luffy asked. "What's going on?"

"HEY, GUYS! QUESTION: DID YOU JUST SAY MY NAME?" a man shouted from seemingly nowhere.

"Where is he?!" somebody shouted.

"I don't know!" another person replied.

All at once, the streets of Water Seven descended into pure pandemonium. People started shouting and fighting to get away as fast as they could. The Gems and pirates just watched as chaos unfolded all around them, confused and concerned at the same time. "He's gonna start trouble again!"

"Is he responsible for what happened to Iceburg?!"

"LOOK! HE'S UP THERE!" In an instant, everybody's heads peered up toward the top of a building where three shapes could be seen tapping their feet behind a thin curtain. The sight was enough to send shivers down the peoples' spine.

"COME ON, EVERYBODY! DON'T BE SHY! SAY MY NAME!" the now-posing and thrusting shape called out.

"NO! GET LOST!" the crowd started to shout, becoming more angry

than fearful.

"HE ATTACKED ICEBURG!" they started to chant.

"YOU DESERVE TO HANG, YOU GOOD FOR NOTHING PUNK!"

"...I am assuming this is a normal occurrence here?" Pearl asked carefully, completely perplexed by everything happening around her.

"This seems to line up with everything we have seen here so far," Peridot concluded.

"What a bunch of noisy flies..." the shape sighed to himself. Finally, he threw away the curtain and revealed himself to the crowd. The man in question wore an open red Hawaiian shirt with green palm trees revealing a gold chain on his muscular chest. His forearms were oversized and each possessed a blue star tattoo that was surrounded by arm hair while his hair was a shade of bright blue. In lieu of pants, the man wore a very small thong and was completely barefoot. His eyes were covered by sunglasses and, oddly, his nose appeared to be made of pure metal.

"I'M WATER SEVEN'S NUMBER ONE SUPER-GUY! THE FACE OF THE UNDERWORLD AND YOU KNOW WHY! I'M THE MAN WITH THE PLAN, THE POWER, AND FAME! PEOPLE EVERYWHERE CALL OUT MY NAME!" he sang at the top of his lungs, pulsing his body to the beat of the drums. As he danced, the two females he had at his side emulated every move he made. They both had dark, square-shaped hair and were wearing very revealing clothing. Finally, they hit the ground and put their forearms together in a thrusting position in the air, making it appear that the two stars on the man's forearms had actually combined into one.

"AHHHHH.....FRAAAAANNNNNKKKKKYYYYYYYYY!" the man shouted, triggering a dramatic explosion behind the trio.

"I...I don't...that was unnecessarily dramatic," Pearl commented, trying to make sense of the display while Amethyst laughed hysterically at their antics.

"It's no more dramatic than how we arrived on the Grand Line for the

Davy Back Fight," Garnet pointed out, giving the three a round of light applause.

As Pearl continued to fluster, the denizens of Water Seven began to scatter as fast as they could. Staring down at the chaos, the man called Franky flipped up his sunglasses and flared venomous eyes filled with hatred. "COME OUT AND SHOW YOURSELF, STRAW HAT!"

"Why is that...barely clothed man after you?" Pearl asked Luffy.

The captain looked baffled until suddenly realization dawned on his face. "Franky...he's the one who beat Usopp into a pulp," he growled, clenching his fist. "He stole our money!"

"What?!" Nami snapped. "That's him?!"

"HEY! I'M LUFFY!" Luffy shouted angrily at him.

"*YOU'RE* LUFFY?!" Franky growled as loud as he could. As he continued to yell down at the pirates, every exaggerated action and pose he made was copied by his two companions. "YOU MADE QUITE A MESS IN SUCH A SHORT AMOUNT OF TIME, DIDN'T YOU?! I CAME BACK FROM A VERY IMPORTANT ERRAND AND WHAT DO I FIND? MY MEN ARE BEATEN UP AND MY HOUSE IS DESTROYED! MY RAGE KNOWS NO LIMITS! I AM FURIOUS! I WON'T BE ABLE TO SLEEP FOR AT LEAST A WEEK!"

"WHO CARES ABOUT THAT? WHERE IS OUR MONEY?!" Nami demanded .

"Of course she goes straight for the money," Pearl sighed.

"I SPENT IT! YOU PROBABLY STOLE IT ANYWAY, SO WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?"

"WE DON'T CARE ABOUT THE MONEY!" Luffy cut in before Nami could freak out. "I JUST WANT TO KICK YOUR ASS!"

"Excuse me...I CARE ABOUT THE MONEY! I CARE VERY MUCH ABOUT THE MONEY!" Nami screamed in Luffy's ear.

Franky was silent for a second before giving a low laugh. "YOU'RE STEALING MY LINES, YOU PIRATE BASTARD! HELL; YOU EVEN STOLE THE LOOK OF KIWI AND MOZU HERE!"

"I did what?" Luffy looked around until he saw Garnet waving.

"He means me," Garnet told him, pointing at her square afro.

While Luffy turned his back, Franky began to inhale deeply from atop of the building. Finally, he exhaled and shot forward a long stream of fire aimed directly at the pirates. Seeing that he was about to become grilled bull, the ride carrying the Straw Hats began to frantically swim away as fast as it could.

"He has a Devil Fruit?" Pearl asked, summoning her staff.

"Maybe. Doesn't your brother have a fire Devil Fruit?" Nami looked to Luffy, clearly panicking at their opponent.

"There are more than one fire-based Devil Fruits," Pearl explained. "Regardless, we have an advantage here. This is a city of water and we are currently traveling on an aqueduct. We already have quite the head start, so it should be no problem finding him and getting justice for Usopp."

As Pearl prepared to leap off to rush back after Franky, she watched as the man jumped down right into the water. The Gem sat there and blinked, taken back by what she saw. "...what just happened?"

"He tripped into the water! But he ate a Devil Fruit!" Luffy looked down into the water.

Amethyst began to laugh. "Maybe he didn't know that he drowned if he ate one of those things!"

"How anticlimactic," Garnet commented.

"We need to get him before he drowns!" Pearl told them. "He might have hurt our crew, but we can't let him die."

Pearl jumped in the air to dive down after him, but was blindsided by the fact that the small boat carrying the crew was destroyed right

from under her. Shocked as she watched the others find ground on the nearby walkways, she plummeted down toward the one responsible for its destruction...

"How is he swimming?!" Nami freaked out.

"I didn't eat a Devil Fruit like your dumbass captain!" Franky smirked as he pulled his arm back to prepare for a punch. "But I sure as hell can stretch like him. **Strong Right!**"

Punching forward, the man did not just punch the sky. Instead, his fist detached completely from his arm (held only by an internal metal chain) and flew toward an off-guard Pearl. She was swatted away into the crowd as the arm returned back to its owner.

"Who needs a Devil Fruit when you are a cyborg?" Franky grinned as he admired his arm and the damage that it caused.

"Cy-Cy-CYBORG?!" Peridot squealed. "A pure combination of humanoid and machine! I need to take a closer look! I...GAH!"

The second Peridot got a good glimpse of Franky, she screamed and pointed at him. "IT'S JASPER! SHE'S TURNED INTO A CYBORG!"

Franky's grin disappeared as he cocked his head in confusion. "...what? Did you just call me a woman?"

The Gems stared at Franky and tried to figure out just what Peridot was talking about. Franky looked nothing like the antagonistic Homeworld Gem. However, it was Amethyst who realized it first. She began to point and laugh at Franky's face. "It's his nose! She... she thinks that his silver nose is Jasper's gem! That's rich!"

"...you're joking," Pearl tried to stifle back a chuckle. "Peridot, you can't be serious!"

"Why not?! Look at him! Can you tell me with certainty that this cyborg is NOT a reformatted Jasper?! This is the Grand Line, is it not? Anything is possible here!"

"Stop mocking Big Bro, you weird green girl!" Kiwi yelled at Peridot.

"Yeah! He's gonna beat your faces in!" Mozu chanted.

"Damn straight, girls!" Franky struck a manly pose. "Step aside, girlie. I'm here for your captain, not you."

"If you think we are going to let you attack our captain, think again. You fight one of us; you fight all of us," Amethyst called to him. She then shot a look at Pearl. "We always have our friends' backs here."

"Fair enough. A man's gotta respect that," Franky said as he cracked his neck. "Don't say I didn't warn you. You know, I actually felt bad about your ship when I heard about just why you had all that money. I was actually going to try to help you with it, but then you went and pissed me off..."

"Stop talking and fight!" Luffy snapped, clearly agitated. "You don't get to talk about Merry! I want to kick your ass and send it flying away for what you have done to my crew!"

"Let's see you and your entourage try! Your attacks can't pierce my cyborg body!" Franky boasted as he pointed his arm at Luffy. In a second, his hand opened up on a hinge and revealed a hollow interior inside of his arm. The palm of his hand then turned into a scope, allowing Franky to target Luffy specifically. Before Luffy could figure out what was happening, Franky fired at him. **"Weapons Left!"**

Luffy tried to jump away but found himself face to face with a cannonball. However, Pearl put herself in front of her captain and sliced the projectile weapon in two, sending them into two nearby buildings. As this was happening, Garnet went to punch the cyborg, who jumped away from the Gem and proceeded to shoot another blast of fire at her. The Gem was unfazed as she pressed on toward her opponent.

While he was distracted with Garnet, Amethyst used her whip to tie Franky in place. However, his strength was more than enough to break free from her grip. Unfortunately for him, he found himself on the opposing end of Luffy's outstretched foot, who had made good on his promise to kick him away.

As Franky got up from the rubble of the shipyard building he landed in, he saw each of his opponents getting swatted away by an unknown force. Although the pirates were at a loss by who had interfered with the fight, Franky was all too familiar with the newest members of this fray, as were the citizens of Water Seven.

"It's the Galley-La carpenters! They'll stop the fighting and save us!" the crowd cheered. "Go, Dock One!"

As Luffy and the Gems struggled to get up, the shipwrights of Dock One appeared. All of them looked annoyed beyond belief, but the sight of them caused Nami to sigh with relief. "Thank goodness. These guys are here!"

"Who are 'these guys?'" Peridot asked Nami from the sidelines. "You are familiar with them?"

"Yeah. They are going to build our new ship. With them on our side, we'll be able to stop this madness and end the fighting before they destroy the entire shipyard."

"Oh...well then...KICK THAT CYBORG-JASPER'S FACE IN, 'THESE GUYS!'" Peridot yelled excitedly.

"Hey, dumbasses! This is my fight! Why don't you stick your oversized nose somewhere else, Kaku?" Franky angrily growled at the shipwrights.

"When you practically destroy our workspace, you don't get much room to tell us what to do," Kaku retorted.

"How are you going to fix all of this mess, Franky?!" another shipwright with a long beard asked.

"We'll deal with that later, Tilestone..." Paulie cut him off. "We have more important business here...right, Straw Hat Luffy?! How dare you show your face here?!"

Luffy wiped away some of the debris off of his shoulder. He looked at the shipwrights and scratched his head in confusion. "...what are you talking about? We only heard about Icepops this morning and..."

"Man...you attacked my family AND you pissed off Galley-La?" Franky mocked Luffy.

"WE DIDN'T DO ANYTHING TO THEM!" Luffy snapped.

"It's true!" Pearl explained. "What could we possibly have done? We spent most of yesterday dealing with your 'family' and then having our own..."

"ENOUGH TALKING OUT OF YOUR ASSES, YOU SHAMELESS HARLOT!" Paulie snapped before shooting his rope at Luffy's head. **"ROPE ACTION: HALF-KNOT!"** The rope tied around Luffy's throat and started to choke him. Thinking fast, Pearl moved to cut the rope before it could kill him. As Luffy was lifted into the air, Pearl sliced Paulie's weapon. However, it was not enough to stop Luffy from crashing into the pavement.

"HEY! THIS IS MY FIGHT! PISS OFF!" Franky stamped his foot angrily.

"Please! Please stop this! We haven't done anything at all! Why are you attacking us?!" Pearl pleaded desperately as the other shipwrights prepared to bring out their own weapons. Each of them set their sights on a specific Crystal Gem and Luffy.

"We don't want a fight," Garnet added cautiously. "We just wanted to purchase a ship and check on how your mayor is doing."

"You DARE ask about Iceburg?!" Paulie snapped, bringing his rope back to him. "None of you have the right to say his name...not after what your crew did to him!"

At once, the members of Galley-La started their attack. The bruiser called Tilestone grabbed a giant pillar and prepared to strike it at Garnet. The fusion punched the large pillar into pieces and tried to avoid the multiple punches he threw at her. Amethyst found herself engaged in a rope war with Paulie, each attempting to hurl items at each other. They continued to catch what the other threw in the air and found themselves locked in a close stalemate.

Pearl was busy evading gunshot after gunshot from Lulu's twin

pistols after he first attempted to shoot Luffy and discovering that his bullets had no effect on his, careful not to swat any bullets toward the crowd of cheering bystanders. None of the Gems wanted to actually strike the shipwrights, but they were practically given no choice. Luffy, on the other hand, was getting repeatedly attacked by the silent Lucci. Despite being made out of rubber, the strikes that he was landing were actually affecting him. It was making no sense whatsoever.

Franky, watching his fight get interrupted before his eyes, decided quickly to interject and fired a shot at the members of Galley-La. This only forced Kaku to come after him instead of ganging up on one of the others. "You are wasting my time, Franky!"

"YOU ARE RUINING MY FIGHT!"

"ENOUGH!" Luffy yelled as loud as he could after getting kicked away by Lucci with a very powerful kick. "WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?! WHY ARE YOU GUYS FIGHTING US?! WHAT DID WE DO?!"

"DON'T PLAY DUMB WITH US, STRAW HAT! YOU AND YOUR CREW ARE THE ONES WHO TRIED TO ASSASSINATE ICEBURG LAST NIGHT!" Paulie announced to the pirates and the crowd.

As the crowd began to take in what Paulie told them, the Gems and Luffy looked blind-sided. "THAT'S PERPOSTEROUS! WE DID NOTHING OF THE SORT!" Pearl exclaimed.

"HOW CAN YOU BLAME US FOR THAT?! WHY WOULD WE ATTACK ICEPOPS?!" Luffy demanded.

"When he regained consciousness, Iceburg told us he remembered two people coming to attack him. One of them was a member of your crew: Nico Robin!"

"Iceburg's alive?!" Franky asked, seemingly relieved to hear.

"ROBIN?!" Peridot spoke up. "YOU KNOW WHERE SHE IS?! WE HAVE BEEN LOOKING FOR HER EVERYWHERE!"

"So have we," Kaku told them. "We have a lot of questions for Nico Robin."

"I don't know why you bastards did it, but Iceburg wouldn't lie. We trust him over shameless pirate scum like you!" Paulie pointed at Pearl.

"Look, allow us to explain! You said this happened last night, correct? Well, I can show you exactly what we were..." Pearl retorted before a chisel was thrown at her. Amethyst pulled Pearl out of the way right before it would have hit her.

"WHAT WAS THAT FOR?! YOU COULD HAVE SHATTERED HER!" Amethyst screamed, her concern for Pearl outweighing her anger that she had for her.

"I don't care. You pirates always have two things on your wanted posters: 'Dead or Alive.' Do you know what that means?" Kaku told the Gem.

"I DON'T HAVE A WANTED POSTER!" Amethyst yelled.

"The law will not protect you, Straw Hats," Paulie announced to them. "You are all going to die for what you and your friend did to Iceburg!"

"STOP TALKING ABOUT ROBIN LIKE THAT! SHE DIDN'T DO IT! LET ME TALK TO ICEPOPS! IT HAS TO BE A MISTAKE!" Luffy pleaded with the shipwrights.

"If you think we will let you anywhere near Iceburg, you've got another thing coming," Lulu told Luffy.

"YEAH!"

"KILL THEM!"

"THEY ATTACKED ICEBURG!"

This was the new tone of the citizens of Water Seven. The people, angered by the revelations presented by Iceburg, had officially turned into a mob. Before they knew it, Peridot and Nami were

captured by crowd. "GET YOUR HANDS OFF OF ME!" Nami freaked out.

As they struggled to get free, they began to realize the gravity of the situation: The Straw Hats were now considered public enemy number one in Water Seven. Slowly but surely, word would begin to spread and everyone would be on the lookout for anyone associated with Luffy's crew. This sentiment was best summed up by Paulie: "You assholes can't escape. We are gonna get all of your friends... and we are gonna put them through hell!"

"GET YOUR HANDS OFF OF OUR FRIENDS!" Garnet demanded. "YOU ARE MAKING A SERIOUS MISTAKE!"

"YOU made the mistake of attacking our mayor. If you attack the mayor, you make all of Water Seven your enemy," Paulie growled.

"ROBIN COULDN'T HAVE DONE IT! SHE HAD NO REASON TO ATTACK THE 'ICEPOPS!'" Peridot shrieked as she struggled.

"Well, we have every reason to attack you!"

Quickly, Paulie tied his rope around Luffy and forced him to the ground. Despite being trapped, Luffy refused to fight back. When the Gems prepared to interject and save Luffy, the pirate struggled to shake his head, causing them to stay on guard. Raising an eyebrow, Paulie tightened the rope. "What was that for?! Fight back, you bastard!"

"No! We have no reason to fight you! We didn't attack Icepops! We aren't your enemy!"

Unfortunately for Luffy, the members of Galley-La replied by passing our various knives and saws. As the pirate watched them do this, Lulu clarified just what was going on. "If bullets won't work on you, maybe this will!"

"We won't just sit by and let you kill our captain!" Garnet announced. "Crystal Gems: do what you have to do to save Luffy!"

"You don't have to tell me twice! AHHHHHHH!" Amethyst turned into a rhino and charged directly at Paulie. With that, the Gems directly

engaged the members of Galley-La in an all-out brawl. While the Gems were fighting to get Luffy out of harm's way, the shipwrights were fighting to kill and the crowd was clearly on their side...

All except for Franky and the Square Sisters, who were now being ignored.

"They are really going at it, aren't they?" Kiwi commented.

"It's exactly the kind of service we expect of our fine Galley-La shipwrights," Franky agreed from the sidelines. "Still, these assholes are deliberately getting in the way of my prey. I can't stand that at all!"

With that, he pulled over a nearby table and proceeded to flip it over dramatically. "STOP FIGHTING MY VICTIMS!" Franky yelled over the sound of Garnet getting punched in the face.

"SHUT UP, FRANKY!" Paulie shouted, dodging Amethyst once again. "WE'LL TAKE CARE OF YOU LATER!"

After getting ignored once more, Franky simply sighed. "Fine. If words won't fix this, then I'll have to do something drastic."

Producing a t-shaped pipe, he connected his arms together and pointed them at the fighting pirates and shipwrights. Taking a giant breath, Franky's arms then greatly expanded. The citizens of Water Seven, seeing this happen, began to scatter once more, screaming for their lives.

"COUP DE VENT!" Franky screamed at the top of his lungs.

Before anyone could react, a giant bullet of air shot at the dock and exploded. Shattered, pieces of the dock flew up in the air and began to crash onto the ground. Dock One was completely decimated all due to the cyborg's attack. The various shipwrights found themselves pinned to the ground, unable to predict the intensity of Franky's attack.

"How...how on earth did that cyborg manage so much power?!" Pearl weakly gasped, pulling herself out of the rubble. She watched Garnet and Luffy do the same with Amethyst, Nami, and Peridot.

Panic and confusion were on their side and Pearl could see that Luffy was thinking exactly what she was.

"Don't know. Don't care. We need to run right...now!" Luffy told the others.

"How are we going to escape unnoticed?!" Peridot wailed. "This is madness!"

"We'll improvise. Let's get out of here and find Icepops!"

"Luffy, are you crazy?! We can't..." Nami started to tell him off before getting grabbed by Luffy.

Taking the lead, Luffy began to run away from the crowd. As the citizens began to notice and yell in their direction, Pearl could not help but feel so defeated at all of this. The Crystal Gems were outlaws once more, Robin was being accused of murder, and Steven was still nowhere to be found.

What were they going to do?

GWMAPT

As Steven finally worked up the energy to walk around Water Seven, he discovered a completely different world than that of the one he saw the day before. Gone were the bustling streets full of cheerful people in masks. In their place were worried and angry souls, talking to each other in whispers and through tears. The youth had no idea what was happening, but he could empathize with them.

"Perhaps this island is accentuating the negative in all of us?" Steven wondered aloud. "Is that's what is going on?"

He tried to listen in to what people were saying, but all he could make out was talks of an incoming iceberg or something. However, he very quickly honed in on some particularly angry individuals shouting as loud as they could. "IT WAS THOSE PIRATES! THEY DID THIS TO ICEBURG! LET'S FIND THEM AND GIVE THEM WHAT'S COMING TO THEM!"

"There are more pirates here?" Steven asked himself. "I guess they came here to get their ship fixed too..."

As much as he wanted to go and help the people with their pirate problem, Steven knew that he would be of no help to anyone if he did not get something in his stomach. As such, he continued on his quest. Unfortunately, most places of employment were too crowded to get a meal. Steven was starting to get worried. "These people are really worried about that iceberg...it must be a whale of an iceberg or something! Still, where am I going to eat..." Steven thought about it as he walked until an idea struck him. "There were some stores near Dock One...maybe I'll try there!"

The youth rushed toward the dock in question before discovering a terrible sight: the area was nearly decimated. A crowd was gathered around the wreckage, all discussing what happened. Steven went over to the crowd to listen in and hear what happened. "This is terrible! Those pirates should be put to death for what they did!"

"I don't know who I'm angrier at: those assassins or Franky!"

Before Steven could ask anyone to clarify just what happened, he caught a glimpse of a piece of wreckage becoming loose from the destroyed unfinished ship. At once, the piece fell down and was about to land on a young woman. Without even thinking, Steven summoned his shield and jumped to protect her. "Ma'am! Look out!" The woman gasped and caught her breath, only just realizing how close she was to getting knocked out.

"You...you saved me!" she whispered, looking up in awe at Steven. For the first time, the crowd stopped their heated arguments and began to clap and cheer. Causing his shield to disappear, Steven helped the woman up.

"It's what I do," Steven smiled, feeling good about what he just did. "Are you okay? Did you get hurt?"

"No...no, I'm fine! I'm just frazzled, that's all," the woman bowed. "How did you do that?"

"My gem!" Steven smiled.

"Gem?!" the woman covered her mouth in shock. "I...well, thank you for the save, but I really need to go. My annoying sister only sent me out to survey the damage here and I know she'll get her panties in a twist if I don't get back. When all this panic is settled, I'll find you and thank you properly."

"You don't need to thank me," Steven replied and extended his hand. "I'm Steven Universe."

The woman narrowed her eyes and adopted a wide smile. "Eirney Heca. I'll see you before you know it!"

"Okay! Bye!" Steven waved as she ran back. Before he could acknowledge what just happened, he felt a large hand on his shoulder. Turning around, he found himself face to face with two familiar faces. "Apollo! Nero!"

"We meet again, Mr. Universe," Apollo gave a nod. "We happened to be walking by and watched your little display. Your quick thinking saved that young woman's life. You should feel proud of yourself."

"To be honest, I'm not really in the mood to feel proud of anything," Steven sighed. "Well, except hunger..."

"You're hungry? What's the problem, kid? Did you spend all of your money at that mask store?" Nero asked. He then looked around and narrowed his eyes. "And where's your little friend? Don't tell me you blew your date yesterday!"

"It's a long story..." Steven looked down and kicked the ground. "I don't even know anymore."

"Well, that's a shame," Apollo told him. "I hope everything works out for you both."

"Yeah...wait, aren't you guys playing your show today? Shouldn't you guys be practicing?"

Apollo and Nero gave each other a look and then gave out an exaggerated sigh. "Look around you, kid. Everybody is so worked up over what happened to the mayor that nobody wants to go to a concert. Music is just not in the program today here."

"I concur," Apollo agreed. "Our timing was rather unfortunate."

The half-Gem raised an eyebrow. "What happened to the mayor?"

"Have...have you been sleeping under a rock or something?!" Nero yelled. "This is literally all everybody is talking about!"

"I mean, I slept on a rock for quite some time...but does this have to do with that iceberg that's heading our way or something?"

The two musicians just stood there as they tried to form words. Nero broke the silence with hysterical laughter. "You...you thought that Iceburg was a LITERAL iceberg! That's rich! Ha!"

"What my companion is trying to say is..." Apollo tried hard not to laugh as well. "Iceburg is the mayor of Water Seven, not a glacier. He was shot last night and the town believes that it was done by an incredibly wanted criminal."

"You mean those pirates," Steven put the pieces together.

"Indeed. Now it is pure pandemonium until the assassins are brought to justice...hence our current predicament."

"You're wrong!" Steven told them, shocked at the thought of their being evil pirates on the same island as his dad and Connie. "Well, you're right about the pandemonium part and about how this is a bad situation, but you are wrong about the music!"

"I don't follow."

"Music is the one escape that EVERYBODY could enjoy! You need to keep playing! A musician's life is a life that is dedicated to being the one constant that people can rely on! Water Seven need you guys more than ever!" Steven declared. At that moment, Steven's stomach began to growl incredibly loud. "Excuse me...I'm really famished..."

"Well, I'm gonna speak for the ape here and come out and say it: if you really think we should put on our show, we should do it. You're quite the persuasive fellow, kid," Nero patted his back.

"And I am going to speak for my lesser mink companion and suggest that we take you out to lunch as a thank you for the motivation," Apollo told them.

Steven blushed but shook his head. "I can't do that! You guys need the money more than I do!"

"Poppycock. We insist...right, Nero?"

The weasel-looking man locked eyes with the mink and folded his arms. "I suppose we do."

"But everybody is out searching for those pirate guys! I've been looking for somewhere to eat for a while now and..." Steven started before getting silenced.

"Don't worry about it," Nero gave him a thumbs up. "We passed by the perfect place to grab a bite to eat. Our treat for the pink shield hero."

The half-Gem felt a bit of doubt in his heart over the offer. However, Steven was a very trusting individual. What was the worst that could happen? "You're sure?"

"We insist. Come on. On to the food!" Apollo pointed and lead the way.

"Horary! Musician food!" Steven clapped and followed along. As they began to walk, Steven found himself humming. His two companions, picking up on it, began to slightly clap to the rhythm of his song. As such, Steven felt obliged to sing a jaunty walking tune. *"Hi-Diddly-Dee! A musician's life for me! A libretto book in every hand! Don't forget the microphone stand! Hi-Diddly-Day! A musician's life is gay! Singing a song will set you free! A musician's life for me!"*

"Hi-Diddle-Dun! A musician's life is fun! You sing a song with an open heart," Apollo joined in.

"So long as you remember your part," Nero laughed.

"Hi-Diddly-Dee! A musician's life for me! It's great to sing on the

open sea! A musician's life for me!" Steven finished, laughing. "That was great, guys! You're really versatile, aren't you?"

"We are more talented than we let on," Nero admitted. "Ah, here we are! Kid, welcome to Blueno's Bar!"

Steven looked up at the establishment and frowned. It reminded him of a western saloon, but with bull horns affixed on the top of the building. "Uh...am I even able to come in here? I thought we were looking for food?"

"Bar food is food. I doubt the owner will mind so long as you don't order a hard drink," Nero told him. "Come on in. I'm famished!"

Trusting his new friends, Steven followed them in and were greeted by a man behind the bar counter. He was quite large in a spotted-leopard open shirt. He had facial hair and his actual hair was styled to look like the bull horns on the outside of the bar. "Howdy, folks! Welcome to Blueno's!"

"Oh, hello!" Steven waved. "Am...am I allowed in here?"

"I don't see why not, young man. It's not like you are the only kid in here," Blueno laughed, pointing to an older woman and a child with green hair.

Steven's eyes widened as he realized just who those people were. "Chimney! Kokoro! What are you guys doing here?!"

"Hey, Steven! Granny came here to have a drink with the mayor before he got shot and brought me and Gonbe along," Chimney grinned and pointed to her rabbit. "Mr. Blueno has some great juice! You should have some!"

"It seems our hero has made some friends," Nero nudged Steven in the ribs. "You are quite popular with the ladies, aren't ya?"

As Steven blushed, Apollo walked over and gave a hard stare at Kokoro. "You...you're different from the other lesser minks, aren't you?"

"Nope," Kokoro told him as she downed another glass of beer. "I'm

just me."

"Interesting..." Apollo told himself. "Mr. Blueno, do you serve any food here? Our good friend Steven is quite famished and could use a bite."

The barkeep nodded. "Sure. I can heat up something. I'll get you a small menu of what I have in the back...it's not much."

"I appreciate it, sir!" Steven bowed and took a seat by Kokoro, with Apollo and Nero sitting next to him.

"Anything for a 'hero,'" Blueno replied. "It seems like we need more of those right about now. What did you do?"

"I saved this woman with my shield," Steven told them. In front of their eyes, he summoned it and showed it off.

"Interesting look...Devil Fruit powers?"

"Gem," Steven corrected him and unbuttoned his shirt to show off his gemstone.

"And here I thought I'd seen it all," Blueno chuckled as he went to fetch a menu.

"So, kid..." Kokoro acknowledged Steven. "Gotta say that I'm surprised to see you about in the open with what's happening."

"What do you mean?" Steven asked.

"You know...Iceburg being shot and all..." Kokoro shrugged.

"I just heard about that. I hope they find those killers before they try to hurt another person," Steven shook his head. "It seems like nobody is having a good day, are they?"

Kokoro was silent as she sipped more of her drink. "Where are your pals? Have you seen them recently?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Steven muttered. Blueno returned and handed Steven a small menu. He focused on looking at the few

options that he could pick from. "Could I have some of these potato skins and a water?"

"Coming right up," Blueno nodded. "Be right back."

"Anyway," Kokoro continued, nudging the depressed youth. "Your other three friends made it on the sea train yesterday safe and sound. There's only two trains left today so who knows? Maybe they'll be back from Backslide before you'd know it?"

"Maybe..."

"Cheer up, Steven! At least we are safe here from the storm!" Chimney exclaimed.

"What storm?" Steven asked.

"Aqua Laguna...haven't you felt that increased wind?" Kokoro asked him. "It's basically high tide, but on a larger scale. Once a year, our island gets hit with a giant wave and the city starts to sink...the lower part of the city literally gets submerged underwater."

"What?! That's terrible! This happens every year?! Why isn't there a way to stop it?!" Steven asked, looking incredibly nervous.

Before Steven could get an answer, the door opened up and three people made a stylish entrance into the bar. There were two ladies with hairdos that vaguely reminded Steven of Garnet (which promptly made him feel slightly upset again) and a man with blue hair which drooped flat down his face. Steven was quite sure that he looked familiar, but could not pinpoint the face at all. "HEY! ARE YA FEELING SUPER?!" all three of them announced to the bar patrons.

Blueno, who returned from the back room of the bar, shrugged and walked over to a nearby soda machine. "I guess..."

"How can you just 'guess,' Blueno?! Live a little! Be SUPER like your's truly!" the man howled with laughter and struck another pose. He then did something that made Steven jump: he opened up his chest and took out three empty bottles. "Can you give me the usual? I ran out of cola fighting those asshole pirates who tried to kill Iceburg."

"Only if you have money, Franky," Blueno told him.

"WHAT?! You'd dare charge me: a patron of this fine establishment?! When did you start being so cruel?!"

"Big bro, you still have some money left from last night!" one of Franky's friends told him. After shuffling around in his pockets, the man pulled out a wad of berries and looked flabbergasted.

"This is unacceptable! How dare I retain any extra spending money after a spending binge?! It is unbecoming of me! DRINKS ON ME, BOYS!" Franky announced, throwing the excess money into the air.

"YOU GO, FRANKY!" everybody cheered.

"Thank you, Mr. Franky! That was really nice of you," Steven smiled and waved to the blue-haired man. "I really appreciate it."

"No problem, squirt! Drink a milk or something on me..." Franky sighed as he sat down in a barstool. "Man, I'm trying to feel super, but I just feel like crap."

"The only crap around here is that crap you are believing about those pirates," Kokoro chuckled.

Franky, looking over to her for the first time, practically jumped. "GAH! I THOUGHT YOU WERE A STATUE OR SOMETHING, KOKORO!"

"Sorry to disappoint!"

"Hey, Franky! Can you refill my juice?" Chimney pleaded.

"You're here too? When did this place stop being a bar and start becoming a daycare?" Franky groaned before nodding to her.

"Yay! We've got juice! We've got juice!" Chimney cheered.

"And I've got your cola, Franky," Blueno said, handing Franky back his three empty bottles completely filled.

Franky placed the three of them back into his chest and closed it.

With that, his body began to shake and he threw his arms in the air as steam released into the air. His hair, previously drooping, became rigid as it stood itself back up. "SUPER!"

"WOW! What was that?!" Steven asked, in awe of the man.

"What's the matter, squirt? Haven't you met a cyborg before?" Franky flashed him a smile. "My cyborg body is run on the most super fuel of them all: cola! I needed a recharge after kicking their asses!"

"A cyborg...powered on cola?" Nero asked. "That's ridiculous!"

"THAT'S AMAZING! YOU ARE JUST SO COOL!" Steven clapped his hands.

"Nope...I'm just SUPER!" Franky laughed. Finally, he acknowledged Kokoro. "So, what were you saying about crap, old hag?"

"I'm talking about what you were saying about those pirates. You don't seriously believe that crap about them shooting Iceburg, do you?" Kokoro continued to sip at her drink.

"I'm guessing you know something I don't?" Franky raised an eyebrow.

"What I know is that Iceburg kept getting stalked by officers of the World Government...it seems kind of suspicious..."

"You mean that Corgi-suit that keeps hanging around? You really think he'd be so brazen to shoot Iceburg?" Franky asked.

"Not by him...everyone knows the government's secret dealings are handled by CP9. You've heard of them, Blueno?" Kokoro acknowledged the barkeep.

"I've heard rumors about them, nothing more," Blueno admitted. He then smelled the air and put down the mug he was cleaning. "Seems like your food is done, kid. Let me get it."

As Blueno left to fetch his meal, Steven noticed that Nero and Apollo were listening pretty intently to Kokoro's conversation with Franky.

He had to agree that this seemed like a serious story and was interested to see just why the World Government would want to kill the mayor.

"CP9 doesn't exist and you know it! People just say that in order to make themselves sleep at night when they can't explain why something happened," Franky folded his arms.

"I'd be inclined to agree with her over you, cyborg," Apollo spoke up. "There are several incidents in the world that have been attributed to that group. Why would so many individuals work themselves up to think negatively about the government?"

"Because they are dumbasses, monkey man!"

"My, what a compelling argument," Apollo chuckled.

As Franky fumed, Steven received his meal and offered some to Nero and Apollo, who both accepted the bar food. The three slowly ate as they listened to Kokoro. "It's people like you that make such a group that sulks in the shadows so scary...to deny something that is real...that's the true power of terror and fear..."

"Whatever," Franky threw up his hands in defeat. "Nothing you can say will cause me to believe that the Straw Hats are innocent...not after what they did to my boys."

"WHAT?!" Steven stopped eating and practically fell off of his seat. "The STRAW HATS are the ones who tried to kill Iceburg?!"

The four adults in the conversation shot him a confusing look. "Yeah, kid. You didn't know that?"

"That can't be! They wouldn't kill anyone! They just couldn't!" Steven shook his head. "You guys have to be wrong!"

"They literally just fought off Galley-La! Those assholes just don't go after anyone. Why? What's it to you?" Franky demanded.

"I...I'm sorry! I need to go," Steven got up and started to leave, leaving a few berries on the counter for a tip. "I need to find them....I need to figure this out! Thank you, Mr. Blueno! That was

delicious!"

As the youth ran quickly out the door, he found himself listening in to the conversations the denizens of Water Seven were having for the first time. Everybody was talking about Luffy apparently fleeing away from battle not even an hour ago...about how apparently Robin was stated to be the one who pulled the trigger. Refusing to believe any of that, he pressed onward toward the Going Merry.

"Maybe they went back there...maybe I can find them! Maybe..." Steven panted as he ran.

"Hey! Steven! Wait!" a voice called from behind him. Steven allowed himself to stop and turn around. It was Apollo and Nero, chasing after him with all of their might. "Don't go!"

The boy stopped himself and waited for them to catch up. "Why'd you run off, kid? You barely ate any food!" Nero asked.

"That's beside the point! Are you okay? You don't look well," Apollo told him.

"It's not me...well, actually it is me...but my friends are in trouble. They are being framed for what happened to the mayor and regardless of how I am feeling right now, they need me!" Steven exclaimed and wiped away tears that were forming on his face. "I really, really, really and thankful for you both offering me lunch and for checking in on me. You guys are gonna put on a great concert and I really want to hear it when this is done. But I need to do this... I'm a Straw Hat."

The mink nodded extended out his hand. "For what it's worth, I believe you. I wish you luck on clearing your friends' names."

Steven felt a rush of gratitude at his new friends. It said a lot about their character to not ask questions or judge him for his association with the Straw Hats. He went to shake Apollo's hand but the second his skin touched his, his body began to feel numb. Steven began to feel excruciating pain as what felt like a surge of lightning coursed through his body.

The pain soon overtook his mind and Steven found his world turning black, unsure as to what was happening...

GWMAPT

In a dark, empty room in the back streets of Water Seven, Nico Robin sat at a table with two people. Their faces hidden in shadows, she did not need to look at them to know who they were and what they stood for. She allowed her mind to be completely devoid of thought as she listened in to what they were saying.

"Last night was a complete success. Of course, you became a fugitive in the process," one of the shadowy men told her.

"I suppose I have," Robin told them, taking no joy in this conversation.

"What's important, however, is what happens tonight," the man made very clear. "You need to break into Iceburg's mansion tonight and find the plans. Burn the place down if you need to. We've traced Tom's plans to him. Now he is our only link to get the weapon in our hands."

The man narrowed his eyes and Robin could feel their cold gaze in the darkness. "I don't care how you do it. In the name of CP9, do what must be done. Do not hesitate. This is the burden of those who follow Absolute Justice."

Without missing a beat, Robin nodded. "Understood. Iceburg dies by dawn."

The Musician and the Archaeologist

The dream always begins the same:

You are standing in a desert street, surrounded by abandoned buildings. You begin to run, but soon realize that you need to be strong. Finally, you find the courage to turn around and move through the buildings. You walk and walk until finally you see her in your path:

The blue-haired woman.

Your hand feels heavy and you try to lighten it. As you do so, you throw the weight in the air. It materializes into a gem that starts out looking like a clear crystal but slowly materializes into the familiar pink gem that is found in your son's stomach.

The gem strikes the woman. It explodes. You look on in horror as the blue-haired woman screams in pain and clutches the charred remains of what was once her hand. The guilt you feel starts to consume you...

But this time the dream shifts. The pink gem is now shattered on the floor. You scramble to collect the pieces, desperate to save it. But as you do so, a voice cries from the shards:

"I JUST NEED TO BE ALONE!"

As you desperately work harder to put the pieces back together, the cries of anguish coming from the woman get louder and louder until they explode into a crescendo of pain. You close your eyes, unable to stop the tears. You feel more useless than you have ever felt in your life. Everything that you have tried to build has fallen apart and you are unable to fix it... Suddenly, the combined yelling of the shards and the woman turn into a loud bang.

With that, Greg Universe found himself back in the land of the living.

Greg was typically an optimistic, laid-back man. He lived day by day and was not concerned about much besides the necessities of life.

In his mind, a perfect day was waking up to his friends and neighbors in a great mood, having a song in his heart, and seeing his son be himself. Washing cars while whistling a song on a hot summer's day was a luxury Greg looked forward to just as much as he did staring up at the stars while propped up next to his beloved van. The small things were enough and he was happy with that.

Lately, however, things had been changing for Greg. While the consumption of his Devil Fruit did cause Greg to stare longingly at the ocean he could never again swim in, that did not concern him. Music was always a part of his life and his newfound abilities just solidified that for him. What was truly eating away at Greg was guilt and remorse.

While Greg knew a little about some of the darker things Rose had done in the war, he made it a point to have the pair not discuss it and to focus on the beauty of the life they were living in that moment. He had nothing to truly compare her trauma and guilt to until last month, where Greg had gotten into his first true fight since his days wrestling around with his cousin Andy. It was easy to dismiss confronting the likes of General Greivous and those robots attacking that samurai, since those were conflicts that were really happening around him.

Miss Doublefinger was different.

Upon entering the Grand Line, Greg immediately felt useless compared to the likes of his companions and the pirates Steven called friends. He wanted to help bring him home and do his part to help save the kingdom of Alabasta. He felt useless and was afraid to be the weak link in the Straw Hat crew. After his pep talk with Nami, Greg finally took steps to do his part for the crew he would soon become affiliated with. The Baroque Works assassin was the first human he had engaged in combat (he discounted trying to stop Lapis Lazuli when she had tried to choke Steven and Connie to death) and, as such, was the first person he had ever injured. While he was not directly responsible for beating her (that honor went to the combined forces of Nami and Petrea), he had ruined the Officer Agent's hand in ways that seemed beyond repair. She might have tried to kill him and topple a country, but she did not deserve that. Greg knew that every day she would look down at that hand and

blame him...that is if she was not drowning in the ocean due to Malachite or whatever Garnet and Pearl were talking about a few hours prior.

After settling back into Beach City and allowing his mind the opportunity to reflect on the events of his odyssey through the Multiverse and his newfound abilities the Rhythm-Rhythm Fruit granted him, Greg found himself having uncharacteristic nightmares about the incident. It bothered him quite a bit and he beat himself up for it. He attributed it to the added stress of Steven going out to the barn to try to save the world, but deep down he knew that it was his own guilt. At first, he debated talking about it to Vidalia or Barb, but he decided against it. He knew from watching Rose that it would take time to heal and, as such, he put it out of his mind. He refused to allow his actions in a war zone dictate his actions at home.

By the time of Steven's birthday, he had managed to put it all behind him and had truly embraced the relaxed lifestyle that he had once called his own. He had found solace in playing music again and getting to know the two other Officer Agents who were staying in the house he helped build. Even returning to the Grand Line did nothing to trigger his lingering guilt. However, watching his son storm away into this unfamiliar city brought it back. Not only did the guilt of his fight against Miss Doublefinger consume his thoughts, but now it was compounded by the added fear of losing his son again. Although he knew that bad things happened all the time in the world and that the right thing to do was accept it, it was getting harder and harder for him to do so.

Greg always claimed that if every pork chop were perfect, the world would not have the glory that was hot dogs. Sadly, this was one of those times Greg wished he lived in a world of pork chops grilled consistently to perfection. He wanted everything to work itself out. This wish was not just for him, but for his son. Steven already had so much on his plate to deal with. The stress was not healthy for a boy of his age.

Regardless, Greg appreciated Pearl's apology to him earlier in the morning. It might not be enough to bring Steven back to the group, but he knew how Pearl truly felt about him. It took a lot for her to be the bigger humanoid sentient being and talk to him. That small

action was enough to get him to finally sleep...until the loud noise woke him up from his guilt-filled slumber.

"Huh? What's happening?" Greg asked, rubbing his eyes as he surveyed the room.

His eyes fell upon Zoro and Connie, who were both holding back the door. From the other side, Greg could hear intense shouting and pounding, no doubt the loud banging noise that caused him to awaken from his sleep. The noise and shouting only grew more and more intense, causing the musician to become concerned.

"We don't know! There was a large...ugh...explosion outside and, before we knew...gah...it, a large mob formed outside the hotel!" Connie panted as she used all of her energy to help Zoro keep the door shut. "I think they think we might be involved with the shooting of the mayor!"

"That makes no damn sense but explains why we are getting targeted..." Zoro frowned and scanned the room, seemingly looking past the sleep-deprived Greg. "If that's the case, we need to get the hell out of here...and fast. These guys are not in the mood to hear us out. We can't hold them back forever."

"Wait...WHAT is happening?!" Greg tried to process everything in his head. "Why the hell would they think we did anything remotely like that?!"

"Don't know. Don't care. When I count to three, run to that window and jump. We can make the landing and hide in the streets until we can find the others and make a better plan," Zoro shut him down and nodded toward the window in the corner.

"WHAT?!" Connie and Greg said at once.

"We can't just jump out a window! We are up high...she's a kid! I'm overweight and out of shape! How do you expect us to...?!"

"For the love of...Greg, do you trust me?" Zoro growled.

Before the musician could respond, the shouting from the other side of the door intensified and the pounding began to increase. Not

having time to argue it out, Greg found himself getting grabbed by Zoro with Connie holding onto his back with everything she had. The only personal belonging beside the swords at his side that he had the ability to carry was the sword that formerly belonged to Rose Quartz. As Zoro jumped out of the window, Greg did everything he could not to faint or panic.

Upon landing outside, however, he was unable to stop himself from doing the latter option.

"WE JUST JUMPED OUT OF A WINDOW! THOSE PEOPLE WERE REALLY GOING TO TRY TO KILL US OR SOMETHING, WEREN'T THEY?! WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?!" Greg panicked, collapsing by a wall in the alley where they landed. "WAIT, WHAT ABOUT STEVEN?! IS HE HURT?! WHAT ABOUT...?!"

"GREG!" Zoro snapped and grabbed the musician's shirt. "You need to get it through your head that we are in trouble! Staying here and yelling is doing nothing but giving our position away! Be a part of the solution and stop adding to the problem! You have Devil Fruit powers...use them! You wanted to be a pirate? Start acting like a pirate!"

As Greg struggled to articulate the dozens of thoughts going through his head, Connie put one of her hands on his back and patted it. "As harsh as he put it, he's right, Mr. Universe. We won't be able to find Steven or do anything if we stay here. We'll protect you, but we need to run!"

Understanding that he had no choice in the matter, Greg nodded and let the two of them lead the way, doing their part to hide from the citizens of Water Seven. As they did so, Greg thought back once more to his fight with Miss Doublefinger and how his actions hurt that woman. Regardless of what he did to her, doing what he did saved Petra's (and potentially Amethyst's) lives and overall helped the people of this world. If he had to step up and do it again, Greg knew that he would do it. If push came to shove, Greg would do what needed to be done. He would find his son and bring him back to safety. He was Steven's father and it was his responsibility to do so. It was also his responsibility to watch over Connie. If she was protecting him, he would be failing Priyanka and Doug...

...the thought of which scared him far more than anything Water Seven could throw at him.

GWMAPT

Following their confrontation with the Galley-La shipwrights, Luffy, Nami, and the Gems found themselves hiding wherever they could. This situation was further complicated when Luffy made the decision to break into Iceburg's mansion in a futile attempt to talk to him directly, leading the mayor to demand the pirates' immediate arrest. Luffy's face was being distributed around the city thanks to his wanted poster, making it impossible for him to be seen around or to even return to the hotel where they were staying. As such, Amethyst was out in the streets on recon, looking for any sign of her companions.

"She's been gone too long," Pearl pointed out as she paced in a circle in a dark alley. "She might have been captured..."

"Amethyst will be fine. She can shapeshift if she gets into trouble," Luffy commented.

"That doesn't change the fact that she is the only person with purple skin on the island!" Nami groaned and ran her hands through her hair. "This is hopeless. At what point did everything just go to hell?"

"We need to focus!" Garnet snapped. "Worrying about this does nothing to further this situation! Pirate Captain Luffy, we need a plan beyond waiting around and hiding. Once we meet up with the others, we will need to make a move."

Luffy was silent as he thought about it. It was impossible to read him as he closed his eyes and folded his arms. "I'm sorry, guys. I'm just trying to think about what Icepops said..."

"Yes, that Robin was the one who attempted to kill him and that she was accompanied with a masked companion," Pearl said. "These are clearly parts of a larger puzzle that we need to think about later. Garnet is right about our position. With the entire city looking to incarcerate us, we will require an escape route!"

"Yo! You guys are being way too loud for being criminals and junk!" the familiar voice of Amethyst called out in a loud whisper to them. Following her was Connie, Zoro, and Greg. The group looked exhausted, but a sense of relief swept over them all. "Look who I found running in the shadows like they were some kind of ninjas or something!"

"Thank goodness!" Pearl stopped pacing and moved to them. "We were afraid that you wouldn't get out of the hotel...these citizens are rather persistent to say the least."

"That's an understatement..." Greg replied, keeping his head up and looking from side to side.

"Amethyst caught us up to speed on everything," Connie told them. "Is it true? Did Robin really try to kill the mayor?"

"That's what they say...whether or not there is truth to that is another story," Garnet frowned.

"In that case, it's probably a bad idea to stay here for this long, right?" Greg asked.

"My thinking exactly," Nami nodded. "Let's get to higher ground. It will be harder for the people to attack us if we give even more distance between us."

Checking around the corner to gauge their chances of escape, Garnet gave a thumbs up and motioned for them to leave. Without missing a beat, Luffy proceeded to run out into the street without disregard for anyone. Thinking fast, Garnet stretched her own arm out and dragged him back before he could be discovered.

"WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?! YOU CAN'T JUST RUN OUT THERE LIKE THAT!" Nami hissed at him.

"But...but Garnet just said the coast was clear!"

"THAT DOESN'T MEAN TO NOT CHECK FOR YOURSELF!" Nami grabbed his shirt before letting him go. "Why even bother...this is hopeless..."

"Not necessarily. We will have a better chance of getting out of here if we split-up once more, but we will need a rendezvous point, one that is high up like you mentioned," Garnet told the group.

"It's going to be impossible to move like this...we have way too many people in this crew," Greg narrowed his eyes and looked over the scattered Straw Hats. "If we split-up, we may never meet up again. What we need to do is clear up the streets long enough for you guys to move about..."

He waited a moment to make sure everybody's eyes were on him. Greg took a big sigh, not used to being in the spotlight. "Look, I was able to mimic that one guy's voice back when we were looking for the Golden Crown, right? What if I imitated Luffy's voice and Amethyst pretends to be him? The crowd would chase Amethyst and you guys could get away!"

The Straw Hats thought about it. Slowly, the pirates began to nod as they understood exactly what Greg was suggesting. "Not a bad plan," Zoro told him. "Do you think you could manage it? You had problems imitating other people before."

"I'll never know if I don't try," Greg rubbed his hands together.

"Well, let's do it!" Amethyst grinned, altering appearance to match that of Luffy's, who started to laugh at the sight of a purple version of himself. "Look at me! I want to be king of the pirates! Give me meat!"

"It's like looking into a mirror!" Luffy continued to laugh, forcing Nami to cover his mouth once more.

"I'll sneak into the crowd and make it over to that alley on the other side of the street. I don't have a wanted poster or anything, so I shouldn't have a problem blending in," Greg explained. "Amethyst, follow me overhead as a bird or something. When I give the signal, I'll start yelling and you'll run out from where we are. When they run, I'll run back and get you guys. It shouldn't be a problem for you to come find us, right?"

"Nah. Leave it to me, Greggo!" Amethyst nodded, changing from Luffy into a bird. "Are we gonna do this or what?"

"Looks like it," Greg gulped, looking simultaneously nervous and confident.

"You don't have to do this, Greg," Garnet told him. "Amethyst should be fine attempting this on her own."

"Yeah, but what if it's not enough? She got us up to speed on those crazy shipwrights. What if they saw through it? They might question her being a purple version of Luffy, but the voice adds credibility!" Greg explained, locking eyes with the taller Gem. "It's not much, but I know I can help."

The fusion nodded and gave him a thumbs up. "There was never a doubt that you couldn't. Go out there, music man."

The musician gave a brief smile and, trying not to be too awkward, ran right out into the crowd. The Straw Hats held their breath as they waited for a sign. After several moments, there was still no signal from Greg that showed them that the plan was in action. "I've never seen Greg act like this," Pearl commented. "What has gotten into him?"

"It's simple: he's decided to act like a pirate," Zoro grinned.

With that, a loud voice was overheard from out in the distance. "YOU CAN'T CATCH THE FUTURE KING OF THE PIRATES! **GUM-GUM BLAST!**" Luffy's voice rang out. It was shortly overpowered by people shouting and yelling. From their hiding place, the Straw Hats listened as more and more people ran toward the direction of the voice, buying that it was actually Luffy running away.

"That crazy son of a bitch did it," Zoro laughed. "I knew he had it in him!"

"Wait; I have an attack called 'Gum-Gum Blast?'" Luffy asked himself.

"Who cares? All we have to do is wait for Greg to give us the all-clear and we can get to a far more open and secluded place!" Nami exclaimed.

Sure enough, the aged musician huffed and puffed over back into the alley a few moments later. Sweat was formed on his brow and he clutched his knees in an attempt to catch his breath. "Holy...holy smokes! I haven't done...done this much running in years," Greg panted. "W-We are good to go!"

"Greg! That was amazing!" Pearl gasped. "You managed a flawless imitation of Luffy and got the masses away!"

"We are proud of you, Greg," Garnet smiled.

"Really? I...no," Greg shook his head. "Now isn't the time to pat my back...not with my boy out there. We need to move before somebody realizes that they are chasing the wrong pirate!"

"I think we'll be okay! Whose gonna find us here anyway?" Luffy asked as he peered down the street.

"Hey, guys!" a voice immediately responded back to him.

"GAHHH!" Luffy jumped, adopting a fighting stance.

"Chopper?" Nami asked, acknowledging the new figure. "Where did...how did you find us?"

"I followed my nose!" the reindeer-human told them. "Guys, we need to talk about Robin..."

"ROBIN?!" Peridot jumped up. "You have news?!"

"Look, can we focus on finding new ground? We are screwed if we stay here any longer," Zoro reminded them.

Nodding, the Straw Hats slowly moved out from their alley hiding place and rushed as fast as they could to finding higher ground on the other side of the city. Thankfully, Amethyst was doing a great job distracting the citizens of Water Seven so they had little issue regrouping. Once they settled into a new and secure hiding spot higher up in the city, Chopper began to tell the group (minus Amethyst) everything that had happened to him and Sanji (who apparently was planning something on his own) once they split-up from the others.

Unfortunately, he did not have a lot of positive things to talk about.

"So you're telling us that Robin ADMITTED to you that she tried to shatter that human?!" Peridot shouted. "That makes no logical sense! Why would she do that?!"

"She WAS our enemy before she forced her way on our ship," Zoro reminded them. "We can't rule out the possibility that she never stopped being our enemy..."

"No!" Peridot shook her head. "I refuse to believe that Robin would do something like this to hurt us!"

"I agree with Peridot! There HAS to be a better explanation here!" Luffy roared angrily.

"But it's true!" Chopper told them dejectedly. "She thanked us for the time we shared together...and then said that all of this is only going to get worse after today. She said...she said that we would never meet again."

"That has to be significant...something is going down tonight," Zoro commented, trying to put together the pieces.

"You mean she will finish the job she started last night," Pearl bit her lip. "I must admit that I am having a hard time following all of this. We have to be missing a key piece of information here. It's no longer a matter of trustworthiness, at least in my eyes."

"Agreed. Robin would not do this on her own. It is not in her character," Garnet commented.

"But what about what Admiral Aokiji told us? He didn't exactly paint a pretty picture for her...add to that the fact that she was the highest ranking female officer in Baroque Works and it means that this IS a matter of trustworthiness," Zoro argued. "We have to figure out before the end of the night if Robin is doing this of her own accord."

"HOW CAN YOU SOUND SO HEARTLESS?!" Connie started to cry. "IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU HAVE WRITTEN HER OFF ALREADY!"

"No! Nobody wants to look at the hard facts, but they need to be discussed. I haven't chosen a side between whether I believe this or not...the second I do, my emotions will slow me down," Zoro admitted. "We have a choice here. Do we leave the island now before we get pinned for this or do we return to the scene of the crime and hope to stop Robin before she does something she can't return from?"

"We go," Luffy ordered. "No question."

"Understood," the Straw Hats and Gems nodded in agreement.

"This might be a good time to consider the masked individual that both the mayor and Chopper claimed Robin was traveling with," Pearl pointed out. "This person might be forcing Robin to be doing these things."

"Or he could be her partner," Zoro countered. "The masked person isn't the priority."

"Exactly. Catching Robin is. We are bringing back our archaeologist or will die trying," Luffy stood firm.

"You heard the man. Let's expose some light on this situation and find the truth!" Garnet stood up.

"There are too many of us to do this quietly. We need to split-up again...maybe it's time to bring the kid back into the fold," Zoro suggested. "Plus we need to figure out where eyebrows went off to."

"Good idea," Luffy nodded. "Greg, do you want to lead the charge for finding Steven? I think if anyone should search for him, it should be you."

The musician nodded. "Of course I want to look for him!"

"I'll come too," Chopper volunteered. "I should be able to follow his scent. That should make it a bit easier."

"Me too," Connie stepped forward. "If Steven is hurting, I want to be there."

"Count me in," Nami added. "If we can find Sanji, he'll probably respond better to me being there...though I hate admitting it."

"So it's agreed that we should split-up?" Pearl asked. "Where would you like us to go, captain?"

Luffy raised an eyebrow in confusion before adopting a large grin. "You called me 'captain!'"

"Yes...that's your title, is it not?" Pearl gave a confused look.

"Yup!" Luffy laughed. "We could be in for a big fight at Icepop's mansion. We could use all the help we could get if we have to fight those strong shipwrights again."

"Understood," Pearl nodded. "We'll stay with you. Will you be fine, Greg?"

"Of course he will," Garnet told her. "He's more than capable."

"I am?" Greg asked, looking hopeful at her.

"You are."

The elder Universe wiped away at his eye, clearly dabbing away tears that had formed. He took a large breath and motioned for his team to follow him. "Lead the way, reindeer games. Let's find my boy."

With Chopper at the front, Greg led his group toward the edge of the building they were on top of. Unfortunately, reaching the side caused Greg to realize a problem he had overlooked. "Uh...can anyone help a guy out? This is MUCH higher up than that hotel room and..."

"Get on my back, Greg!" Chopper suggested as he shifted into his full reindeer form. "I'll carry you down to the ground."

"Geez, are you sure you can handle my weight? It's been awhile since I've been to the gym and..."

"HEY!" Amethyst's voice cut him off. The purple Gem flew down to

rooftop and allowed herself to return to her natural form. "You guys were a pain to find! I think I lost that unruly mob so let's get on with the...the...what'd I miss?" She noticed that half of the crew was starting to leave and she hit her head. "You guys are splitting up already? Wasn't the whole point of me flying off to avoid splitting up?"

"It's a long story," Garnet commented. "We are preparing to begin surveillance on the mayor's mansion in the hopes to catch Nico Robin before she does something she will regret."

"Seriously?!" Amethyst's eyes widened. "But then why are you splitting up?!"

Greg looked from Chopper to Amethyst and started to stroke his beard. "Amethyst, it's Steven. We're gonna get him back before whatever goes down with the mayor and Robin happens again."

The Gem was silent for a moment before letting out a sigh. "Say no more. What do you need from me?"

"Amethyst?" Pearl asked.

"You guys should be fine there. I know I've been craving a fight since I got here, but I'd rather do it with my main pal Steven at my side," Amethyst told the group. "Is that a problem?"

"We'll be fine," Luffy nodded as he started to motion his own group away. "You bring our musician home and we'll get our archaeologist."

"And be careful!" Pearl called to her.

"Aye-aye, captain!" Amethyst saluted Luffy. "So, Greg...what's the plan?"

"...getting a lift down?" Greg asked with a smile.

"With pleasure, old chum."

GWMAPT

Robin was ready to do what needed to be done.

Her life was leading up to this moment. After everything that happened in Ohara, she was finally caught and would finally be given the sentence she deserved. All of her life, Robin was told that her mere existence was a crime and now, in this moment, she truly believed it.

Robin had done as she was asked and followed her masked companion to the mansion of Iceburg, the city's mayor. It was explained to her that the man was not only a famous shipwright in his own way, but was actually one of the two apprentices of the infamous Tom. The Fishman was known throughout the world as the being who built Gold Roger's ship and was put to death years ago by the World Government. While Iceburg escaped punishment, it was clear that he was being watched for years...infiltrated by CP9.

CP9 was a group that officially did not exist. Its purpose was to be the World Government's premiere assassins. Their missions were completed in the shadows and with such discretion that they were spoken about only in whispers. Most people doubted that such a group could be real, but Robin knew full well what they could do.

CP9 was at her homeland of Ohara when it was burned to the ground, led by the fierce Spandine. They were, along with Admiral Aokiji and Admiral Aikanu, the main individuals responsible for ruining Robin's life. All the archaeologists of Ohara wished to do was to learn the secret of the Void History...and that was all it took to slaughter all of the residents of the island whether they were involved or not.

All except her.

Although she escaped, Robin was given such a high bounty at a young age that it made it impossible for her to live a normal life. Every guardian and partner she found tried to turn her in and with every betrayal came another step toward her epiphany about life. Life itself was meaningless for her as, at some point, she would either hurt or be hurt by others. She was a walking source of misfortune for everyone she knew. As such, she had her own secret

wish:

Robin wanted to die.

She had hoped to either die in Alabasta or escape into the night and die another day, but the machinations of Monkey D. Luffy and Steven Universe made that impossible. The two of them saw something in her that made her reconsider her own negative outlook on life, causing her to abandon her plan and to take the captain's suggestion to join his crew to heart. This led to one of the greatest experiences of her life: visiting Beach City.

The ocean-based city was one of the most pure and innocent places she had ever seen and it caused Robin to actually find enjoyment in the small things life had to offer. Meeting Connie Maheswaran continued that inspirational hope, showing her that she could even be seen as a friend despite all of the horrible things she had done in her life. Though brief and short, it would be a period of time that she reflected on for many nights.

Returning to the Grand Line allowed for even more adventures, including traveling into the sky and even infiltrating a Marine base. These were moments that caused Robin to bond with her crew. They had almost immediately accepted her into the fold and she was enjoying their company in return. This feeling of acceptance only intensified when Steven, Connie, Greg, and the Gems returned to the Grand Line with her old Baroque Works allies in tow...

And Peridot.

Peridot was different in that she had already given Robin quite a bit to think about. It was her actions that caused her to have a confrontation with the Marine called Tashigi. It resulted in the destruction of a family's restaurant and yet another grim reminder of her own failures as a human. However, the former Gem antagonist was almost a completely different being on the Grand Line. She was innocent and pure...and she latched onto Robin's kindness almost instantly. The archaeologist knew the value of a little encouragement in a dark time and was pleased to be able to instill that feeling into another soul. Peridot had almost made her existence feel justified...

But then Aokoji returned into her life and started a chain reaction like dominos falling down that represented her eventual descent into her current situation. The last positive memory of her life would seemingly be sharing a tender moment with Greg Universe discussing his love with Steven's mother. She was now a tool of CP9 to be used and then, eventually, dispatched. There was no doubt in her mind that she would die for what she has done in her life. Iceburg's death would only be the final horror in a lifetime of atrocities.

Still, Robin knew this was the best way to save her friends from her existence. They might be framed for the murder, but they would escape in the Going Merry like they always did, free to sail to the next island knowing they had dodged a proverbial bullet by ditching the Devil Child of Ohara. Steven and Luffy would be crushed, but they would move on. She worried about Peridot, but she would likely return to Beach City and settle down there.

But now was the time to focus on getting the job done. This would be a moment of betrayal not just from Robin to her crew but also for the members of CP9 to the shipwrights of Galley-La. While she had no personal attachment to the names and faces of the assassins whom she was forced to work with, she knew that Iceburg would be devastated to see people that he trusted for years reveal themselves to be government spies once they took off the masks that currently concealed their faces:

Rob Lucci. Kaku. Blueno. Kalifa the secretary.

Robin knew of at least one other individual, the younger Eirney Heca, but she was dispatched to locate two other, unknown members of the group. The archaeologist inquired about it, but was given no answer. As it did not matter to her in the present moment, Robin did not press the issue.

She and the tall, bull-like Blueno made their way into the destination, but were confronted by practically every shipwright on the island. As noble of a cause as it was to defend their mayor, they were no match for a member of CP9. Upon dispatching a great deal of the men and leaving the rest to Kalifa, Blueno used his Devil Fruit abilities to create a door into the mansion. As this was happening,

Robin prepared herself to let her body go into autopilot. She would do this task and murder this man. She would surrender herself into the custody of the World Government. She would die.

But the Straw Hats would live to sail another day. The Crystal Gems would live to stop the Cluster and save their planet. If Robin could allow these people the ability to leave before getting dragged down by her, then she could die in peace.

After all, to die is merely the next great adventure.

Before she knew it, her target was in front of her eyes: Iceburg.

"How...how did you get in here? I knew you would come back after last night, but how?! There isn't a door there!" Iceburg managed to get out.

"I ate the Door-Door Fruit," the masked Blueno told him. "I can create a door anywhere I choose to."

With that, he shot the mayor with a revolver.

"Why did you do that?!" Robin asked, seemingly confused. "We were supposed to wait for a signal!"

"The fact that he could still talk means as he is not as weak as he should be," Blueno explained. "The victory is in the preparation. That is how we approach assassinations...that is our way."

"Assassinations?" Iceburg coughed up some blood. "That sounds like CP9..."

"You know quite a bit," Blueno told him. "That is quite unfortunate for you."

"Then...then I wrongly accused the Straw Hats..." Iceburg commended. "I was a fool..."

"Who can blame you?" Robin asked. "You were right to suspect them. I was the one who was here last night."

"We allowed you to live last night so you could see Nico Robin's

face and blame the Straw Hats for our actions. However, if we killed you last night, we would not have obtained the blueprints for the ship...the weapon. I know for a fact that you ended up passing it along to one of your most trusted shipwrights. There can only be one man that you trust enough: Paulie," Blueno explained. "Yes... we know about it. Two of our number are confronting him at this very moment. The plans will be ours."

Blueno, seeing no more reason to gloat, went to leave the room. He stopped and gave Robin a small Den Den Mushi. "I am going to take care of the rest of the shipwrights to be thorough. You will get a signal from the others telling you that they have found the plans. When that happens, kill him and be done with it. The Straw Hats will take the blame and Justice will be upheld."

Robin, knowing that it was better for her companions to leave the island wanted criminals than get entangled into her affairs, nodded and watched Blueno walk through the door he created. The room was now silent as Robin examined the fallen Iceburg. She could care less about his fate at this point. Honestly, she could care less about anything.

"I...I'm amazed that you of all people came here," Iceburg grunted.

The comment caused Robin to raise an eyebrow. "Have we met before?"

"No...last time was the first time...but I've always wanted to meet you," Iceburg said. Robin watched as the man tried to reach into his clothing to grab something. Robin had no doubt that it was a weapon and, as such, used her own Devil Fruit abilities to create two additional arms on her own body. Before she knew it, she had four pistols aimed right at him while he only had one.

"So you could kill me?" Robin asked.

"Precisely. You are the most dangerous person in the world!" Iceburg snarled, focusing all of his energy at pointing his gun at Robin. "Studying the True History...reading the Poneglyphs...you are the only one left who can resurrect the ancient weapons!"

"How do you know about the True History?" Robin asked, legitimately interested.

"It's not a crime to know about it. It's only a crime to study it...that's why you've been...hunted since you were eight...that's why you deserve to die," Iceburg explained. "I don't know why you would work with the World Government after they have hunted you for years, but...but I suppose it doesn't matter. NO GOOD CAN COME FROM THOSE ANCIENT WEAPONS! I don't care if they are supposed to be used for good or not...they should never be unearthed..."

Robin sighed, tiring of this conversation. "How I study history and what I study is my own business and mine alone. You are just a pawn...an outsider in all of this. You have no say in what happens to these plans or my life."

The mayor startled to chuckle. "You think I'm an outsider in all of this? Why do you think the government has targeted me? Do you have ANY idea what plans your friend is looking for? I hold the plans to the ancient weapon Pluton!"

"What?!" Robin was floored. She had learned information about this weapon before in the country of Alabasta, but she had no true desire to pursue the specifics of the weapon itself. Now she was face-to-face with the man who actually could bring the weapon back into the world.

"That ancient warship...was constructed here, in Water Seven, many years ago. Its power was legendary but it was feared by everyone who knew of its existence. In the end, the shipwrights..." Iceburg explained and coughed. "...of the time believed that the only way to combat such an evil was to pit it against itself. As such, a blueprint of its design was created and passed down in secret from generation to generation until it ended up in the hands of my teacher: Tom."

Iceburg stared into Robin's dead eyes and locked them in place. "He was always uneasy about the lone survivor of the Ohara massacre...the one being left in the world who could read the ancient language of the Poneglyphs. As young as she was, she had

to have the same horrific mind as the rest of the devils from Ohara... why else would the World Government search high and low for her?"

The archeologist began to feel anger like she had not felt in sometime. Just like with the Marines under Tashigi in Alabasta, she was being judged purely for the crime of being an Oharan scholar. Iceburg could see her anger and used it to finish his point. "I should have burned the plans a long time ago, but I couldn't. Not with you alive in the world. AS LONG AS YOU LIVE, IT IS MY DUTY TO GUARD THE BLUEPRINTS SO I CAN STOP YOU AND SAVE OUR WORLD!"

Having enough, Robin immediately created enough arms to disarm the man and pin him to the ground. Finally, she moved on top of him and pointed the gun she was holding to his head. "You sad, little man...did you say everything you wanted to say? It doesn't matter if either of us are alive by this point. The members of CP9 are getting the plans from your friend as we speak..."

"Mwell...allow me to tell you one last thing," Iceburg attempted one final defiant grin. "Those plans they are looking for? They're forgeries! Only I know where the real ones are, so kill me! Kill me and the government will never get their prized weapon!"

As if on cue, the Den Den Mushi Blueno gave her began to ring. Answering it while keeping her weapon on Iceburg, a shocked Robin listened in to hear what the others had found. "We have a complication. Meet back in the bedroom and do NOT kill Iceburg."

"Hey! Where's Robin?! Tell me or I'm gonna kick your ass!" a familiar voice could be heard in the background of the call.

Robin's heart momentarily sank. There was no doubt about it: the captain was here. If he was here, Steven and the others were probably close by. While she cared little of her own existence at this point, the small amount of her that could feel emotions started to fret. She knew that the stronger members of the team like Zoro or Garnet could hold their own for a time, but nobody in the crew would stand a chance fighting the members of CP9.

They would be killed or worse: tortured in a prison like Impel Down or made to become a slave.

Unfortunately, there was nothing that Robin could do. Events needed to play out like she promised they would. She knew that they would be better off without her and that they would no doubt get away. They might be implicated in this atrocity, but it was better this way.

She did not need them anymore in her life, and Robin was fine with that.

One by one the members of CP9 filled the room and one by one they revealed their identities to Iceburg. Robin cared little as she watched almost all hope in his eyes vanish. It was clear that this betrayal hurt more than any torture the World Government could provide. Robin could sympathize with him, but her attention returned to the scene when Lucci, the man who chose to only speak through a pigeon the entire time he knew Iceburg, took charge of the situation and addressed Iceburg directly:

"Now Mr. Mayor, we will discuss the location of the plans for the Pluton ancient weapon...we would rather you tell us before there are more innocent victims..."

The Long-Dead Apprentice

The fighting outside of Iceburg's mansion started to die down almost as fast as it began. Luffy, fearless and foolhardy as ever, decided to forego all common sense and made his way directly into the mansion the second an explosion was heard. Of course, this ran counter to the orders to wait it out that he himself had given the Gems and Zoro as they waited in secret for what felt like hours. Seeing as their captain had a track record of jumping in and getting things done rather quickly, it was not uncalled for the pirates to assume that Luffy cleared a path for them to enter in themselves...

Of course, this was not the case. The second the Gems and Zoro left their hiding spot, they were immediately confronted with every shipwright Water Seven had to offer. Their loyalty to Iceburg was to be commended, but this just meant that the Straw Hats had more innocent people to get through to break inside and stop Robin from doing whatever she had planned.

"Zoro! Don't tell me you are actually using your swords on these humans!" Pearl shouted in the middle of battle. She and Garnet were busy doing their best to subdue the shipwrights without much injury while Zoro had taken to cutting his opponents down with his swords.

"I'm using the backs of my blades...honest!" Zoro grinned as he took down over thirty men in one shot. "I'm not gonna kill them!"

"Enough talking! The faster we end this, the sooner we can make it inside!" Garnet commanded with a punch to a man's stomach, immediately knocking him out and causing him to drop his gun.

"Agreed. Allow me," Zoro called as he clutched his swords even tighter. "**Dragon Twister!**" Twirling his blades, Zoro summoned up a storm of attacks that simultaneously slashed and blew away all of the remaining shipwrights. One by one they fell to the ground, beaten and broken.

Pearl, bending down and checking the pulse of a nearby victim,

frowned and pointed at the swordsman. "That was reckless! You could have killed them!"

"Back. Of. The. Blades," Zoro puffed out his cheeks in pride as he held his sword high. "You're just mad that I beat more shipwrights than you."

"YOU WERE KEEPING COUNT?!"

"You two weren't?" Zoro raised an eyebrow.

"OF COURSE NOT!" Pearl looked offended.

"...I was," Garnet admitted as she blushed. "I think you've got me beat though with that last one, so the point is moot."

"Damn straight! What about you, triangle-head?" Zoro called out to Peridot, who was making it a point to remain hidden. "Did you stop anyone?"

"...I...I..." Peridot stammered in shock, taking in the level of strength the swordsman had. "...I need new limb enhancers..." It had been far too long since she possessed her original limb enhancers, which would have allowed her to participate in combat. Unfortunately, they had been lost to the seas by the Galaxy Warp...thanks to Amethyst.

"We can focus on whatever the hell you are talking about later," Zoro called as he started to charge away from the mansion. "Come on! Let's do this already!"

The Gems just stared at the man and gave each other a concerned look. "Is...is he for real?" Pearl asked.

"Sadly," Garnet sighed.

"Does he realize that he's...?"

"No," Garnet shook her head.

GWMAPT

Iceburg could not believe what was happening.

His trusted friends...his trusted secretary...all of them worked for the World Government. All of them had been spies for five years. For five years of his life, Iceburg laughed with them, worked with them, drank with them...he lived with them. This was the ultimate betrayal of trust. This completely made him forget about what Nico Robin had confided in him after hearing her former captain's voice...

He had to focus.

He knew that this day would come eventually. Iceburg had managed to ignore the World Government for years. As a disciple of Tom, it stood to reason that he would be the one in possession of his secret weapon: the plans for the Pluton battleship. Amazingly, they would have been right...years ago.

He had a plan in place for years. He had managed to hide the plans in the one place nobody would ever look for it. The mayor of Water Seven was willing to take the secret to his grave, but this would require him to make it through this moment...

After telling Rob Lucci to his face that the World Government was not acting on the behest of simple human nature, Iceburg found himself on the receiving end of a powerful kick. Kaku had been instructed to grab Iceburg's arm to check his pulse. It was an old trick: if something set off a nerve, the traitor would pick up on it. As he was doing this, the normally silent Lucci began to tell a story...one he prayed turned out to be wrong.

"So...you claim that the blueprints we found are forgeries, correct? I won't lie that I haven't completely bought that story yet, but let's assume that you are telling the truth. You know how deadly the blueprints were and you knew that somebody would eventually come to get them...yet you only told Paulie to GUARD the fake blueprints mere hours ago...that leads me to believe that you have passed them on some time ago...but to whom?" Lucci talked aloud. All eyes were on Iceburg and he knew it. He did everything he could not to give him anything to work with.

"We've watched you for five years, Iceburg. Five years of close examination of every individual you came in contact with. None of them fit the bill for a potential successor or for a person whom you

could trust...except that isn't true, now is it?"

"It is pointless to struggle, Mr. Iceburg," Kaku told him, ever polite until the end.

"Assuming that these are forgeries, you would want to do a good job of making sure they looked official, correct? A quick cursory glance at the names listed on the drawings show this to be true," Lucci continued as he opened up the document. "Three names...three names are all that are on here and it is these three names that have all but confirmed our theory. You see, it took us quite some time to learn that you were an apprentice to the man who built Gold Roger's ship...but we also learned that there was one other apprentice who was assumed dead. That is where the story should have ended...except it doesn't."

Lucci pointed to the name appearing next to Iceburg's. "'Cutty Flam' is listed right here. One would guess that he is the apprentice that was assumed dead, but did a man not come to Water Seven four years ago with that same name?"

"I recall the name," Kalifa nodded.

"As do I," Kaku agreed.

'Oh no,' Iceburg thought as he lost all control of his breathing. In an instant, a million butterflies swarmed in his chest and made his heart race. He knew that it was over.

"The man who came and visited you...was none other than Franky!" Lucci revealed. "Do you have any idea how long we looked into his background? Honestly, not very long at all. We found nothing of interest and just dismissed him like the oaf that he is. But he and his stupid 'family' are here all the time to sell lumber. It would be easy enough for him to make contact with you without notice...the only way you would not give the blueprints to someone like Paulie would be if you were in contact with your fellow apprentice...and I can tell just by looking at your face and checking your pulse that my little theory is proven."

Iceburg looked on in horror at himself. 'How...how could I have

betrayed him?!"

As if reading his thoughts, Lucci went to comfort him. "It is only natural. A lot has happened in a short amount of time. There was no way you would be able to keep it hidden from us. For the record, we don't have anything against you personally, but it is time we take our leave."

"Thank you for everything that you have done for us these past five years," Kaku told him. "I truly appreciate it."

"Let's get moving. The rookies should be done with their objective by now. We'll have them meet us at the train after we catch Franky," Kalifa informed the men while she adjusted their glasses.

"If they didn't, they have no place being in CP9," Lucci scowled.

Before anyone could react, the walls started to pound as it appeared somebody was hitting them as hard as they could. With barely any warning, Monkey D. Luffy and Paulie burst through the wall, each looking angrier than Iceburg had ever seen. "WHERE'S ROBIN?!"

At the same time, Roronoa Zoro and three unfamiliar women came through the main entrance. They too had looks that could easily be described as determined and angry (although the green one looked more in shock than the others). "Luffy, where the HELL have you been?! We got completely ambushed out there!"

"I got captured and stuck with the rope-guy, but we got out after the masked people left," Luffy acknowledged Paulie and focused back on the one person in the room he was searching for. "ROBIN, I FOUND YOU!"

"ROBIN?!" the green girl immediately snapped out of it and started to run out toward the woman who tried to kill Iceburg. "ROBIN, WE ARE HERE!"

"Don't, Peridot!" the tallest woman told her as she pulled the one called 'Peridot' back. "These people are dangerous! These people..."

"...are the shipwrights from before!" the one with the spear gasped.

It was at this point that Paulie became the most shocked person in the room once he realized who was standing in front of him. Iceburg could see the betrayal in his eyes. Throughout all of the pain that Iceburg was going through thanks to the various injuries and wounds he had received, he knew Paulie was hurting just as badly. "Mr. Iceburg! I...why are you guys standing around him? Why are you guys dressed up like the guys who tried to kill me before over those forgeries?!"

"Paulie...why the hell...why the hell didn't you run?!" Iceburg wheezed.

"Kaku! Lucci! Kalifa! Blueno!" Paulie blurred out. "This has to be a joke, right? Right?! You...YOU'RE TRYING TO ASSASSINATE ICEBURG?!"

"This complicates things..." the tall woman commented. "Clearly there is something going on here that we are not privy to..."

"Indeed," Lucci folded his arms. "Allow me to tell you this before you all die. Truthfully? We are agents of the World Government sent to spy on Iceburg for the last five years. I know it's a bit of a shock after being friends for so long, so how would you like me to prove it to you? Would you like me to beat the hell out of Iceburg's face? Would you like that?"

"LEAVE ICEPOPS ALONE!" Luffy screamed before getting held back by Paulie.

"You...you can talk?! After all these years talking behind that damn bird, you can talk?! It was YOUR voice that came out of that assassin's mask earlier! QUIT TRYING TO MAKE A JOKE OUT OF ME! **PIPE HITCH KNIVES!**"

From out of nowhere, Paulie produced a rope that had several small knives tied on it. He shot it directly at his old friend, but found that he effortlessly dodged it. In a single strike, Lucci extended his right index finger and jammed it into the shipwright's throat. "**Finger Pistol.**"

As Paulie began to cough up blood, Lucci merely looked on in

disgust. "Don't fight it. You are outclassed in every conceivable way. Our bodies have been trained to peak perfection. We've been trained in the ultimate martial arts technique. It turns the human body into a literal, unstoppable weapon. This is the power of Rokushiki: the Six Powers. We have the strength of over one hundred men apiece...you have only death."

Paulie fell to the ground, hurt in more ways than just what Lucci had physically done to him. His old companion stood before him, ready to give the parting blow. "This was going to happen anyway."

"NO!" Luffy shouted as he kicked Lucci before he could finish the deed. The man effortlessly caught the kick and awaited the inevitable followup attack. **"GUM-GUM..."**

"Iron Body," Lucci whispered.

"GATLING GUN!" Luffy finished. He began to pound Lucci with a flurry of punches, but the traitor showed no signs of pain or even recognition of being hit at all. It was as if he was treating the attack like a fly buzzing around one's face.

"This is wasting my time..." Lucci muttered. **"Shave."** In a flash, Lucci disappeared before everybody's eyes. One second, he was getting pummeled by punches; the next, he appeared directly in front of Luffy and jammed him in the throat with his index finger. **"Finger Pistol."**

Luffy then flew in the air back near where Zoro and the mysterious ladies were standing. Amazingly, the tall one stretched out her arms and caught the rubber-man before he could crash into the wall. "Pirate Captain Luffy!"

"You're lucky that you are made of rubber. If that were any other person, they'd be dead," Lucci commented. He then acknowledged the woman with the afro. "I wonder if the same could be said for 'Gems' like you?"

In response, she turned the hand that caught Luffy into a gauntlet and looked ready to fight if necessary. Before she could attempt anything, Luffy surprised everyone by stretching his arms and

collecting Paulie's limp body.

"What are you even doing?" Lucci asked.

"You're trying to kill the rope-guy, right?" Luffy asked with a cough.
"Even after you built ships together for years?!"

"Correct."

"What the hell is wrong with you?! You guys were friends! You laughed together! I made a promise to this guy after you guys tried to capture the two of us!" Luffy shouted.

"And what, pray tell, would that be?"

Luffy acknowledged all four of the CP9 members and cracked his knuckles. "That'd I'd help him kick your asses for what you did to Icepops."

"But this matter doesn't even concern you all," Kaku pointed out.
"Why even bother?"

"It does too concern us!" the one called Peridot spoke up. "Robin, what is happening?! We've been worried and looking everywhere for you! Come back to the crew and put all of this silly nonsense behind you!"

"Peridot...shut up," Robin shot a hard look at her.

"...what?" Peridot recoiled.

"You know nothing of what I am doing. Did the cook and doctor not tell you that I quit the crew? This includes severing all ties to you all, including you," Robin said coldly.

"But...but...no! That makes no logical sense! You were happy before! There has to be a reason for this sudden tonal shift!" Peridot shook her head, ignoring the tears that were forming.

"You seem to have forgotten the first lesson that I taught you on the Grand Line: throw all logic out of the window," Robin stared her down. "If I am ever to achieve my dream in life, I need to sever all

ties with you people."

"You...you mean to learn about the Void Century?!" Peridot asked in astonishment.

"No. My true dream. My real dream..." she looked away. "I'll make any sacrifice to see that come true."

"Including framing us for murder?" Zoro asked.

Iceburg, who has been listening to this entire spectacle without commenting on what Robin was doing, finally had enough.

"Don't...don't listen to...to her! She's not thi-thinking rationally! You don't have to do this...to get what you want!"

"I don't recall giving you an opinion, Mr. Mayor," Robin shot him a death glare. Without further warning, more of Robin's arms appeared and pinned him down.

"Mr. Iceburg!" Paulie, who had barely regained consciousness, shouted in horror.

"I didn't want to believe it!" the dainty one shook her head. "Robin, let the man go!"

"STOP IT, ROBIN! WE ARE YOUR FRIENDS!" Peridot cried.

"Enough," Lucci interjected. "As touching as this reunion is, we need to get going to find a person of interest before the storm arrives. We have no more use for any of you or even this mansion. As such, in..."

"Two minutes," Kalifa added.

"Thank you. In two minutes, this building will go up in flames. If you don't want to die, I suggest you leave now...if you can," Lucci informed the group.

One by one, the members of CP9 began to line up. They clearly looked prepared to fight if necessary. Zoro, taking one look at them, grabbed his sword. "So does anybody STILL have doubts about Robin betraying us?"

"I DO!" Luffy shouted.

"Likewise," the tall woman agreed with the dainty one nodding her head as well.

"Believe what you want. Soon this building will be engulfed in flames and everyone inside of it will die. Of course, this will all be blamed on you, so nobody will even think twice about it. That's the beauty of you all being pirates after all," Lucci allowed himself a rare smile.

"I should go," Robin spoke up. "I have somewhere else to be."

"Indeed. You have played your part well, Nico Robin," Lucci said and nodded. "Good work."

As Robin turned to leave, Iceburg did everything he could to muster up the energy to yell to the Straw Hats. They needed to know what she told him in private..."Don't...don't let her go!"

"ROBIN!" Luffy yelled as he ran for her. "YOU CAN'T JUST LEAVE US!"

The pirate ran directly into Blueno, who blocked the way toward Nico Robin. The pirate did everything he could to move him, but the barkeep used the same "Iron Body" technique his companion used and discovered that he was firmly planted in the ground. In horror, Iceburg and the others watched as Blueno went from taking the attacks to effortlessly dodging them like a paper in the wind (and for a man with his massive size, it was impressive and horrifying). As this was happening, Peridot managed to reach Robin and grabbed her hand. "Please...haven't these past adventures meant anything?! Haven't...haven't I meant anything?"

Without turning around, Nico Robin dismissed her hand and moved to the nearby window. "Goodbye, Miss Peridot."

"ROBIN!" Peridot cried in agony, openly weeping while Luffy confronted his opponent. The members of CP9 were not concerned by her, focusing all of their attention on Luffy, who had just attempted to punch Blueno again right before he used his "Shave" technique to disappear once more.

"I didn't disappear," Blueno explained to Luffy as he materialized right behind him. "I just moved faster than your eyes could see using my superior leg strength."

"Then take this, you asshole!" Luffy growled as he turned around with another punch. This time, Blueno jumped up in the air. Amazingly, he remained in place.

"**Moonwalk**," Blueno called out.

"He...he can fly?!" the dainty woman asked incredulously.

"I'm not flying. Our leg strength is enough to jump off of cushions of air to keep afloat," Blueno explained to his opponents.

As he did so, Kaku and Kalifa joined the battle by appearing behind Luffy themselves and proceeded to kick the captain and the air surrounding him. "**TEMPEST KICK!**"

The second the kick landed on Luffy, Iceburg could see all but Peridot of the Straw Hats tense up. "GET DOWN...NOW!" the tall one commanded and she stretched her arms over to the despondent green girl to remove her.

Iceburg could not believe his eyes as he watched the full power of the kick go from landing on Luffy to destroying the very walls of his mansion. 'These...these people aren't human...'

"With a swift enough kick, it is possible for a trained individual to create a wind that is as deadly as a scythe. That is the power of the 'Tempest Kick,'" Kalifa explained.

Not taking any chances, both the dainty one and Zoro went in to attack using their weapons, but were each blocked by the former shipwright with ease. "I met you back on your ship, didn't I?" Kaku asked casually to Zoro.

"You did...which means you aren't actually a shipwright!" the swordsman gasped. "That means..."

"No. I was truthful in my assessment of your ship," he remained calm as he replied.

"Well, excuse us if we don't believe you! **Pearlfect Storm!**" the one with the spear shouted, striking at Kaku with superhuman speed and strength.

Zoro, taking advantage of his companion's attack, doubled up with his own barrage of blows. Despite all of their speed and power, Kaku was still in control of the fight.

It was at this time that Robin finally made it to the window. She opened it up only for Luffy to shout one more time at her. "ROBIN, OUR CONVERSATION ISN'T OVER YET!"

"I have nothing more to say to you and you will never see me again," Robin still refused to look them on the eye as she jumped out of the window, presumably never to be seen again.

As she did before with Peridot, the tall one stretched out to grab Robin, but found her arms literally cut off by Kalifa, who wasted no time in using her spiked whip to sever her limbs. Surprisingly, there was no blood to be found but it did not matter:

The Straw Hats had failed to retrieve Nico Robin.

"That's sexual harassment," Kalifa told her opponent as she looked on in anger at the remnants that used to be her limbs.

"You...you..." the tall one repeated in anger. "GAH!"

The ends of the arms started to glow and the woman's hands regrew in a flash. They then proceeded to turn into gauntlets and started to pummel at Kalifa. Unfortunately, Lucci took the opportunity as she was attacking to strike her with his "Finger Pistol" in the back. The woman immediately froze up and collapsed to the floor, seemingly trying her best not to die in that moment.

"Must...not...poof..." she gasped in pain.

"Interesting...I was curious how your body would hold up since you are a 'Gem.' It turns out not very well..." Lucci dryly commented. "Enough of this. Finish it."

In unison, the members of CP9 dropped Zoro, Luffy, and the other

woman to the ground, leaving only Peridot standing. She stared in horror at the scene in front of her. "How...how did you..?!"

"What...are you people?" Paulie managed to get out as he got to his knees.

"We are far beyond ordinary humans! Most of us have been training since we were children to become a part of CP9. We have spent our lifetimes overcoming human limitations all to serve the World Government. Compared to our Rokushiki, you have no chance to hold your own..." Lucci taunted the group.

"Sir, we need to leave now. The detonation device is about to go off," Kalifa reminded him.

"You're right. Still, I might not have this opportunity again in your lifetime. Allow me to show you just how truly outmatched you would be if you engaged CP9 in combat," Lucci smiled. That was all the warning Lucci gave before he shifted his body from a human into a giant, muscular leopard.

That was the last sight Iceburg saw before his world was engulfed in flames.

GWMAPT

"Hmm...do we have a trace of his scent yet, Chopper?" Greg asked.

The small group led by Greg paused in the middle of the square. There was a sense of panic in the air as people were rushing everywhere. Despite this hindrance, the elder Universe was determined to find his son and end this terrible day.

"Not yet. There are so many people around...everybody is trying to escape that Aqua Laguna-thing so it's harder than it usually would be," the reindeer-doctor admitted.

"Ugh," Amethyst groaned. "If his nose isn't working, what are we gonna do?"

"Well, let's put on our detective hats on and figure this out the old fashioned way," Greg mused. "If I were Steven, what would be the

first thing I did when I woke up?"

"Go back to the ship to apologize?" Connie suggested. "There's no way he could stay mad for that long at Garnet or Pearl. He doesn't have a bone in his body that could keep a grudge!"

"No...he'd need to figure out what to say first...although I do agree about the grudge part," Nami tapped her finger to her cheek. "Plus, there was a lot of stuff said last night. If we all needed to have a group talk to begin to move on, he's probably still just as hurt. Add into the fact that our ship was probably the first place that unruly mob searched for us, I have to say that the ship is out of the question...although now I am starting to get concerned about Usopp getting stuck in the middle of everything. He probably doesn't even know about that Aqua Laguna storm coming in..."

"Actually, before we found Robin the first time, Sanji and I deliberately made our way over to Merry and had a giant conversation about what the Aqua Laguna was," Chopper interjected. "We were loud enough so Usopp could be kept in the loop...I hope Luffy won't get mad that we kind of went behind his back."

"I doubt Luffy wouldn't mind extending him that curtesy," Nami handwaved it. "So we can rule out starting with the ship. We need to think about this..."

"Maybe we don't..." Greg snapped his fingers. "Guys, when you wake up in the morning, what's usually the first thing you do?"

"Sneak into Pearl's room and rearrange everything?" Amethyst suggested.

"Go to the bathroom?" Chopper tried.

"Brush your teeth?" Connie gave her answer.

"Count money," Nami stated as a fact.

"No! I mean...yes, technically...but what do you do after all of that?" Greg tried again.

There was silence for a second before all of them shouted in unison. "Eat breakfast!"

"Bingo-bongo!" Greg nodded. "There's no way Schtoo-ball was going that long without some kind of fuel to keep him going!"

"Food is always the answer!" Amethyst smiled.

"But where do we go from here?" Nami asked. "There are probably dozens of places he could have eaten...and even still, how are we supposed to find him from there?! Gah, this is hopeless!"

"I wouldn't be so sure about that..." a new voice called out to them. "Nagagagaga! You pirates look like hell!"

"Yo; it's the old lady from the train!" Amethyst pointed at her.

"Eh, something like that," Kokoro shrugged. She was followed by the young Chimney and Gonbe. "Don't worry, I don't believe you had anything to do with Iceburg or anything like that."

"Good, because that's not true!" Connie exclaimed. "We would never..."

"I got that vibe from you lot. You're all pretty unique, you know that? Regardless, I couldn't help overhearing your problem...you're looking for the polite kid, right?"

"You've seen my son?!" Greg's face lit up. "Where? When?"

"Oh, we saw him this morning! He went to Blueno's bar and we drank juice and water! It was super fun!" Chimney giggled.

"A bar? Steven went to...to a bar?" Nami raised an eyebrow.

"They grow up so fast," Amethyst sniffled as she wiped away a tear.

"Why was he at a bar?" Greg asked, both confused and concerned.

"He was palling around with these two interesting fellows...they were going on about how the kid was a hero or something," Kokoro elaborated. "One kind of looked like a weasel and the other..."

"...was a giant gorilla?" Connie asked, the color draining from her face.

"Yeah...you know him?"

"We...we met them on our date," Connie explained to everyone.

"Steven had learned how to float but couldn't get down and then...and then he started to plummet and was caught by the one guy. Apollo...his name was Apollo."

"You guys were talking to random strangers?! Gah!" Greg started to panic. "What happened next?!"

"He said...he said that they were there for a concert or a performance...and then Steven showed them his gem and..." Connie began to cry. "Oh no...you don't think they were bounty hunters or something, do you?"

"Bounty hunters? No..." Kokoro shook her head. "But they definitely are not on the level. You said that there were here for some kind of a show today?"

The young girl weakly nodded, causing Kokoro to frown. "I'm sorry to tell you kids that there was no events like that planned for today in Water Seven...and I'll also tell you he also showed his rock and shield in the bar to the likes of Blueno and Franky..."

"Then what are we waiting for?! We need to get to that bar...now!" Amethyst shouted.

"It's not open. Barely anything is gonna be open now," Kokoro told the group. "This storm...this Aqua Laguna...it's gonna be big. Nobody except for those operating the sea train are staying behind to operate their businesses...and there's only one sea train left tonight, but it's reserved."

"For who?" Name asked.

"The World Government."

GWMAPT

In his small hideout, Franky had his own hands full.

After leaving the bar, Franky decided that the best course of action to get revenge on Straw Hat Luffy was to draw him out. Thankfully, he found the perfect bait in the form of an old member of his crew: the long-nosed Usopp. The pirate had been captured by the Franky Family, who had taken to the streets of Water Seven announcing that news around in the hopes Luffy would hear it. Franky was counting on Luffy getting angry enough to come searching for his friend.

What Franky was NOT counting on was feeling sympathy for his hostage.

Franky had heard bits and pieces of the Straw Hats' plight before, but it barely concerned him after what they did to his Franky House. But Usopp was different. Despite being told the ship was irreparable, he still continued to work at it at the Franky hideout using the small area of water that fit inside. Even as Franky offered to dismantle the ship so it could be given a proper sendoff, he refused.

Usopp told Franky the story of the ship. The Going Merry was a caravel constructed in the East Blue for a young woman named Kaya by her butler named Merry. Merry had presented the ship to the group after they helped her with some kind of pirating matter involving a hypnotist and a butler. The ship then sailed to the Grand Line, crossed over into "another dimension" (whatever that meant), flew up in the sky, and came back to the sea. No matter what damage the vessel received, it continued to remain seafaring. Franky was shocked to hear how far it had come, but he was even more shocked to hear that Usopp had once seen a small person working on the ship. He didn't know what it was, but Franky knew it had to have been a Klabutermann, or a small fairy that was a personification of a well-kept ship.

Franky wanted to hear more, but was interrupted by a knock on the door. He allowed Kiwi and Mozu to answer the door while he continued his discussion with his hostage. "Look, I know it is hard to let your ship go, but it's time man. It's lived a great life! You need to accept that, man-up, and apologize to your pals."

"YOU THINK I CAN JUST WALK BACK INTO THEIR LIFE?! THEY GAVE UP ON HER! YOU WANT ME TO GIVE UP ON HER!" Usopp shouted angrily. "WOULD YOU GIVE UP ON ONE OF YOUR FRIENDS IF THEY WERE ON THEIR DEATHBED?!"

"Dude, you're missing the whole point of the issue! Focus on moving forward and..." Franky began before getting stopped dead in his tracks.

Kiwi and Mozu flew to the ground, bloody and broken. When Franky looked to see who had invaded his hideout, he was shocked to see a group of Galley-La workers, Blueno the bartender, and Iceburg's secretary. "Sorry to barge in unannounced like that," Kalifa announced. "They wouldn't let us in, so I had to press the issue."

"Wha...WHAT DID YOU DO TO THEM?!" Franky shouted in anger. "WHAT ARE YOU EVEN DOING HERE?!"

Quickly, Franky jumped to punch any of them as hard as he could. Blueno put himself directly in the way of his punch and took it without even registering that he was struck. Franky continued to pummel him until he finally grabbed his face and held him in the air. "What the hell is the matter with you?! You seem different...and going about attacking the Square Sisters?!"

Franky saw Blueno extend his index finger, which normally would not have meant anything to him. However, the second he did so, Franky was kicked in the chest by the shipwright Lucci. "Are you an idiot?! We can't kill him now, Blueno!" Lucci scolded him.

"So...so strong," Usopp whispered.

"Are you assholes going to tell me HOW you found me?! This place is a secret to practically everybody!" Franky said as he stood back up. "And don't you usually talk through your pigeon?!"

"Let's cut straight to the point. We are in a bit of a time crunch here," Lucci sighed. "We are undercover agents working for the World Government. You know why we are here, we know who you are, we know what you possess, and we want them...Cutty Flam."

Franky's entire world stopped at the mere utterance of his old name. How had they figured it out? He had erased every trace of his old life years ago. Finally, a thought struck him...one so deadly that he scarcely gave it utterance. However, he needed to know if he was right. "I have no idea how you asshole found that out...but how's that idiot Iceburg doing lately?"

"We killed him," Lucci stated.

In that moment, something snapped inside of the cyborg. It was as if something went out in his head...or rather, his heart. Iceburg had been there with him from a young age as apprentices to Tom, the legendary shipwright. They had made some miraculous things together, including the sea train that Tom desperately fought for. It was those sea trains that led to a major accident that required Franky to rebuild his body from scratch, causing the world to think Cutty Flam was dead. It was those sea trains that gave the World Government the means of killing Tom through the machinations of a slimy agent called Spandam.

But that wasn't all that Tom had died for. Tom was in possession of the plans to one of the Ancient Weapons: the Pluton. Though they never planned on building it, Franky and Iceburg promised to pass it along until the need for it had passed. Iceburg had warned him to leave town the second he secretly gave him the plans, but Franky refused to listen and leave his home. Instead, he reinvented himself as Franky: the ship dismantler whose outlandish actions would secretly keep Water Seven safe in secret.

All of that was about to be undone.

"From Tom to Iceburg to you...we know you have the plans of the Pluton. Hand them over...now," Lucci ordered him.

**"I HAVE NOTHING TO GIVE TO GOVERNMENT DOGS LIKE YOU!
STRONG RIGHT!"**

Unfortunately for Franky, he failed to connect his attack as Lucci came in with an attack of his own. For a moment, Franky's world went dark as he started flying through the walls. However, he came to when he realized exactly WHERE he landed.

"So...this is where the magic happened. This hidden room is the former office of Tom the legendary shipwright and his two apprentices: Iceburg, and Cutty Flam..." Lucci mused. "Interesting..."

"Get...get out of this room! Don't you dare touch Mr. Tom's stuff!" Franky coughed weakly.

He lunged once more after Lucci started to move away his drawers and desk, but found himself restrained by Kalifa thorny whip. "Tom was an out-of-control, dangerous Fishman of almost Herculean strength. We read up on the day he was brought in to be executed. He was about to be pardoned for his crime of building Gold Roger's ship when he and his apprentices opened fire on a judicial ship using experimental weapons. He was executed, true, but nobody was ever charged for that other crime. Iceburg is now dead and Cutty Flam was thought to have died years ago. Yet here you are."

The man with the pigeon sighed and gazed over the room one more time. "We are going to take you to Enies Lobby now as a criminal where you can be charged for the crime you should have been charged with years ago. Along the way, I am sure we can discuss the plans to the Pluton. Still, we have one final piece of business to attend to before we go."

"It is connected, sir," Blueno told him, bringing out a Den Den Mushi with the words "CP9" written on the shell.

"Perfect. When our director heard that you were alive and was the individual with the plans, he was quite insistent that he talked to you. Apparently you and him got into an altercation years ago...something involving injuries to his face," Lucci explained as he brought the receiver to Franky's face.

"What?" the cyborg asked.

"You're live, sir," Blueno spoke into the device.

The snail was silent for a moment before its eyes widened and a shrill voice came out of its mouth. "GAH! I SPILLED COFFEE EVERYWHERE! DIE, COFFEE! DIE!"

After a moment to allow the man on the other side of the Den Den Mushi to collect himself, he began to address Franky once more. "Are you there, Cutty Flam? It has been years since I got the chance to talk to you. Who would have guessed you would have survived being run over by the sea train I was riding on? I truly thought you died, but this is even better! My wounds have hurt quite a bit over the years and I had nobody to blame since I thought I was denied vengeance!"

"Who...who are you?" Franky asked.

"You don't remember me? You don't remember the man who arrested Tom eight years ago?!"

With that, it all clicked. "Don't tell me you're that stooge Spanda?"

"It's 'SPANDAM!' You forgot the 'M!'" Spandam' voice yelled. "Whatever; I'll remind you about it when you get here! Bring the prisoner to Enies Lobby this instant. I have already received confirmation that the other prisoner was intercepted earlier today, so things are going swimmingly! Spandam, out!"

With that, the members of CP9 prepared to tie Franky up with rope and a tarp. However, there was one individual that they had overlooked. "HEY! LEAVE HIM ALONE!"

One glance from Lucci was all it took to get Usopp to drop his heroic demeanor. "Oh. My apologies. I'll be going now."

"Hang on...you're one of the Straw Hats, aren't you?" Kaku asked.

"Not anymore! I quit!" Usopp announced.

"So you've abandoned pirating all together?"

"Never! My father is a pirate and I'm one too!" the long-nosed liar countered.

"Oh. In that case..." Kaku swiftly subdued him. "You're coming with us. Kalifa?"

"Right," the secretary nodded as she readied her whip.

While he was being bound, Kaku walked over to the Going Merry and put his hand on it. "As for this ship...did you bring it to Franky to get it dismantled?"

"DON'T LAY A FINGER ON MERRY!"

"I know you must think that our diagnosis was incorrect due to us being spies, but I am sorry to tell you that we really are master shipwrights. Your ship is dead...it is time for you to accept it," Kaku sighed. He then opened up the lever that contained the small amount of water that Merry was submerged on, causing the ship to be sent out of the hideout and crashing into the ocean below.

Franky would never forget the screams of anguish Usopp let out that day.

GWMAPT

In a feat of strength she had thought to be unimaginable, Peridot continued to push herself as much as she could. Just as the mansion was engulfed in flames, Garnet had managed to place Pearl, the 'Icepops,' and the human with the ropes in one of her bubbles. Unfortunately, she was unable to do the same for the captain and the swordsman, as the agent with the bird sent them flying away before they could be saved. The permafusion had tried to include Peridot in the bubble as well, but she was just out of reach. An even bigger worry was the fact that Garnet had practically collapsed on the floor, unable to move at the present moment. As she had engaged the humans in a fight, neither Pearl nor Garnet were in any shape to try to pop and reform the bubble.

As such, it fell to the great and mighty Peridot to get the quartet out of harm's way.

She pushed the bubble outside of the window and watched it hit the ground. The human with the ropes hit the side of the wall, but it managed to keep its shape despite the trauma. It spoke a great deal of the permafusion's willpower that she could keep the bubble formed despite everything that had happened to her. This was the same strength that Peridot needed as she jumped out of the window herself while holding onto Garnet (who was far heavier than Peridot

was expecting), praying that she would not poof upon impact.

Thankfully, she kept her form as she rushed to the sphere holding the humans and Pearl. It was hard to move while dragging Garnet, but she persisted. She started rolling it as fast as she could to escape the continuing explosions happening all around her. She did her best not to scream or cry, but there was only so much excitement that a young Gem could handle. As such, she freaked out like a Gem that had just come out of the ground.

"GEEEEETTTTT OOOOUUUUUUTTTT OOOFFFFFF
MMMMYYYYY WWWAAAAAYYYY!" Peridot cried worryingly.

After what felt like an eternity, Peridot made it out of the fire and found herself surrounded by the citizens of the island. As they had previously expressed a desire to see her shattered, Peridot initially felt afraid when presented with a large group of hostiles. She dropped Garnet and collapsed to the ground herself. "Don't...don't shatter me!"

"She's one of the ones who were with the pirates earlier!" a voice shouted.

"But look! It's Iceburg and Paulie!" another human shouted. "She protected them from the fire!"

"Yes! Yes, I did...with her help," Peridot got up from the ground and announced to the crowd. She felt no pride in the action, but she wanted to let them know that she was not the enemy. "Please, don't hurt us! We saved your 'Icepops,' but the culprits who burned this dwelling to the ground have escaped!"

"What does that mean? Is she giving up her captain?"

"It might be a trick..."

"It's...It's no trick," a voice called from inside of the bubble. 'Icepops' slowly picked himself up and put his hand on the wall of the bubble. "Can...can you drop this thing?"

Peridot made her way to the weary Garnet and started to gently tap her on the face. "Hey! Garnet! Hey! Garnet! Hey!"

"Ugh..." Garnet groaned. "You...you actually managed to get us out of there, Peridot. I...I didn't know...you had it in you. Good job."

"Wow, thanks!" Peridot blushed. "But listen! You need to...need to drop that bubble," Peridot said and pointed to Icepop's (or rather Iceburg's) imprisoned form.

"No problem," Garnet weakly replied and caused the bubble to dissipate. The second it did, Iceburg landed on the floor and Pearl landed on top of the one called Paulie, who started to cough.

"Get...get off of me, you shameless harlot!" he gagged.

"I would if I could...my body does...ugh...not want to seem to function at the present moment," Pearl explained as she tried to roll off of him.

The crowd took this all in, confused and relieved all at the same time. "Should...should we try to capture them while they are down?"

"DO NOT LAY A HAND ON THESE GUYS!" Paulie shouted. "THEY ARE INNOCENT OF EVERYTHING!"

"Paulie...wait..." Iceburg put a hand in the air from the ground, the other clutching his chest wound. "Can...I just have a minute alone with these ladies, everybody? You can stay, Paulie...but everybody else, please..."

Without questioning the human, the group dispersed. The only individuals remaining were Garnet, Pearl, Peridot, and Paulie. Iceburg glanced at the Gems and sighed. "Mwell...I owe you all an apology. I falsely accused you of the crimes of my peers."

"We understand, Mr. Mayor," Garnet nodded. "It was...an honest mistake."

"Regardless, I need to let you...gah," Iceburg began to cough and groan, breathing heavily to keep himself together. "You need to know this. First, has Nico Robin been acting...odd since coming to Water Seven?"

"Yes! Yes, she has! We were having a perfectly pleasant

conversation one moment and then she vanished out of nowhere!" Peridot explained fast, disregarding her own exhaustion.

"She apparently appeared...earlier this morning to a few of our number and claimed to have quit the crew," Garnet continued. "This happened after your accident last night."

"It's all so peculiar! She claimed not that long ago that her dream was to learn about your Void Century...but that seems to have changed..." Pearl finished.

"I think...I know why that's the case. But before I say that, you need to..." Iceburg winced. "You need to know that both Nico Robin and I have...have the ability to awaken an ancient weapon that could destroy the world..."

"The world?! You're joking!" Pearl scoffed.

"I'm not. Nico Robin is the only person alive who can read the ancient Poneglyphs...and I was one of only two people who knew where the blueprints to the battleship Pluton was. I fear those blueprints have fallen into the hands of the World Government..."

"If you had them, why not destroy them?" Pearl asked.

"I should have...but I was afraid that Robin would raise the weapons of the past and wage war on this planet. Now? Now I see that I was a fool. Have any of you ever...ever heard of a Buster Call?"

"I can't say that I have," Garnet shook her head.

"I thought not. It's not something the World Government wants out...what about Ohara?" Iceburg tried again.

"As in the devils of Ohara?" Paulie interjected.

"He means Robin's home," Pearl corrected him. "We knew something happened on Ohara years ago, but nothing more. She was very...it was a harsh subject for her."

"As it would be. The world was led to believe that the scholars of Ohara were trying to destroy the world and died in their

experiments...that's not the case," Iceburg explained to the group. "Robin explained to me how the island was destroyed by the World Government using a Buster Call. It's an emergency order where...where five Vice Admirals bring ten warships to a location and utterly decimate it. The only people who have the authority to use it are the Admirals and Fleet Admiral Sengoku himself..."

"What does this have to do with anything?" Paulie raised an eyebrow.

"Paulie, Lucci and the others have the ability to summon a Buster Call here to this island to kill all of the Straw Hats! Admiral Aokiji gave them the means to do so!" Iceburg snapped.

"...what?" Paulie dropped his cigar in shock.

"Aokiji..." Pearl's eyes widened.

"So, Nico Robin was forced into a situation where it was either work for the World Government or allow us to be slaughtered..." Garnet gasped.

"She told me you all were her reason for wanting to live..and she would give it all up to make sure you all survived in her place. It would mean allowing the World Government to possess one of the Ancient Weapons, but it didn't matter to her. She would rather protect you all than the rest of the world..." Iceburg finished.

As everybody took in this terrible information, one individual began to make noise. No matter how inopportune it was to do so, Peridot could not help it. She needed to laugh. "Nyehehe...hehehe..."

"Is...is she okay?" Iceburg asked.

"**NYEHEHEHEHE! I KNEW IT!**" Peridot jumped for joy. ***"I KNEW SHE WAS STILL OUR FRIEND!"***

Renewed with newfound energy, Peridot pointed at Iceburg. "Tell us where she is! We need to regroup and get her back!"

"But...but it's helpless! She's in the hands of the World Government! There's no stopping them now! It's impossible!"

"Please. Peridots like me can perform twelve impossible tasks before the star we are orbiting around fully rises," Peridot allowed herself to smile. "This is nothing we can't handle! WE ARE COMING FOR YOU, NICO ROBIN!"

GWMAPT

Robin was content with what was about to happen. She knew that this was the only ending that her story was ever going to have. If she had to sever ties with the Straw Hats to save their lives, so be it. It had to be done.

When Lucci had threatened her with the usage of a Buster Call on the island to kill her nakama, she immediately resigned herself to this fate. She had lived through that horrible attack once in her life...she couldn't think of doing it again. They all had so much to live for. They all had dreams and hopes that they had to see to the end.

When faced with them losing out on those chances, Robin's dream was easy to let go. Her life was forfeit.

After escaping Iceburg's mansion, Robin made her way to the platform where the sea train was waiting. From what she overheard from the dozens of Marines and World Government officials preparing to leave, the train had not arrived that long ago, but it was already carrying a procession of soldiers under the legendary former knight and current Marine captain T-Bone. He was known to be honorable and was a good leader to his men, but Robin cared little about it.

There were also whispers of a secretive group of individuals with an interesting prisoner of their own. Robin assumed it was CP9 with Franky. She had no idea how they got there before her, but she chalked it up to Blueno's Devil Fruit powers.

"Listen up!" the World Government official called Corgi called to the congregation. "I just got word that the final members of CP9 will be arriving any moment now. Nico Robin, you will get on the train before they arrive. You will occupy Car One by yourself...it should give you time to consider all of the heinous crimes you committed. It took us twenty years to get you...how nice of you to end this chase

for us!"

Ignoring the sense of being watched and the horrible feelings she had about this man, Robin entered the train. She heard something faint in the distance, seemingly coming from a nearby car. She dismissed it as she made her way toward the front. However, as she got closer to the fifth car, Robin's mind began to race.

'Is that...is that singing?! No...no, it couldn't be...they wouldn't have...'

"When the enterprising burglar not a-burgling," a familiar voice was singing to the crowd of Marines, including the gaunt Captain T-Bone.

"Not a-burgling!" they responded.

"When the cut-throat isn't occupied in crime," the youth sang again.

"-pied in crime!"

"He loves to hear the little brook a-gurgling!"

"Brook a-gurgling!"

"And listen to the merry village chime!"

"Village chime!"

"When the coster's finished jumping on his mother," the boy who Robin could not ignore sang proudly, much to her shock and horror.

"On his mother!"

"He loves to lie a-basking in the sun!"

"In the sun!"

"Ah, take one consideration with another," the half-Gem called out.

"With another!"

"The Marine's lot is not a happy one!" Steven Universe cheered.

"Oh...when a constabulary duty's to be done, to be done, a Marine's lot is not a happy one!" they all joined in unison, leaving Robin even more of a mess than she was before.

'No...not you...not here...why are you here, Steven...why?!'

GWMAPT

When Steven woke up, he was more confused than anything. He had no idea where he was and could not remember what had happened. The last memories that he had were leaving the bar and shaking Apollo's hand. Everything after that was dark...

"Ah. Mister Universe is waking up. Fantastic," the familiar voice of Apollo was talking around him.

Steven opened his eyes and looked around. If he had to guess, was in some kind of a train car. He didn't know how or why he was in a train car, but he was. Around him was Nero (who was adjusting the feather in his hat) and Apollo (who was smoking a pipe and had discarded a newspaper he was reading). The mink folded his paper and got up. "Tell me, son...are you alright? Dizzy? Disoriented? Damaged?"

"...no? I mean, my body feels a bit numb and my head hurts, but I dunno..." Steven muttered, trying to collect himself.

"Ah. No doubt that was from my 'Electro.' All minks can perform it. We have the natural ability to send out coursing electricity...which you unfortunately were on the receiving end of. You have been out for several hours...even I wasn't anticipating you being out for this long," Apollo sighed.

"What? Why? What happened?" Steven asked. He didn't usually ask this many questions, but Steven was truly and utterly lost.

"Before I tell you, could you do me a favor and try summoning your shield or bubble?" Apollo asked. "I just want to test a theory."

Instinctively, Steven found himself surrounded by his bubble. He tried to summon his shield, but found that his hands were bound by an incredibly hard substance. "Handcuffs? I...I don't understand..."

"I imagine you wouldn't. My associate over there outfitted you with Seastone cuffs. I was curious to see if your powers were derived from a Devil Fruit. Obviously, they are not. Fantastic," Apollo clapped. "Would you mind removing his bindings? They won't be necessary."

"I told you they weren't Devil Fruit powers!" Nero shouted as he freed Steven from captivity.

"And I told you we needed to make sure! Now then, what questions do you have for us, Mister Universe?"

Steven thought long and hard about his situation. He was on a train, in handcuffs, and separated from his friends. Finally, the answer came to him. "Are you guys bounty hunters? Don't I have a bounty for helping bring down Crocodile?"

"Close, but no. We did chose you out of your group due to your bounty, but we are not bounty hunters. Rather, we are undercover World Government agents...new recruits to CP9, to be precise," Apollo told the youth.

"CP9?' Where have I heard that before?"

"The odd lesser mink at the bar mentioned it...rather coincidental, if you ask me."

"Wait...secret agents?! You're like James Bond or Dick Grayson or Black Widow or Nick Fury...that's so cool!" Steven grinned, momentarily forgetting the fact he was a prisoner.

The two agents exchanged curious glances at each other before Nero spoke up. "I mean, I have no idea who any of those people are, but sure. You...you do know you are our prisoner, right?"

"Well, if you wanted to kill me, you would have done it, right?" Steven reasoned. "That means that you need my help!"

"...what sound logic," Apollo hit his head and put down his pipe. "Mister Universe, we have orders to take you to Enies Lobby to meet our director. He would like to have words with you over a matter of great importance."

"The World Government needs my help?" Steven asked. "I thought they wanted me arrested."

"We are a rather secretive section of the government..." Nero trailed off. "Honestly, we aren't entirely sure WHAT the director wants with you, other than he...requested the presence of a 'Gem.'"

"Does...does it matter that I'm a half-Gem?"

The two exchanged looks and thought about it. "...no. No, it shouldn't."

"Well, sure! I'm happy to help," Steven smiled.

"It's not like you had a choice..." Nero muttered before getting elbowed by his partner.

"Fantastic! Well, allow me to explain a bit more for you then. We are currently waiting on one more member of our particular section of CP9. You have met her already and she should be here momentarily..." Apollo stuck his head out of his window.

"Hmm...punctuality was never her strong suit. Regardless, then there are the main members of CP9 that have an objective of their own. Don't concern yourself with that one for now..."

"Who is your other member?"

"That young woman you saved earlier. Her name is Eirney Heca. She's our resident mnemosurgeon," Apollo began.

"What's that?"

"Don't worry your pretty little head about it," a soft voice replied. The door to the car opened and sure enough, there was the woman in question. "You'll find out soon enough."

"Ah. Welcome back, crone," Nero teased.

"That's not very nice," Steven pointed out. "I think you happen to look very pretty."

Eirney went from looking offended to blushing. "Why thank you. He

might be one of those Gem-things, but at least he has had manners in etiquette, unlike you! You know I'd rather be called a witch than a crone! Witches are sexier!"

Steven raised an eyebrow and shrugged it off. He didn't know why exactly a young woman was being called a "crone," but he was too polite to ask. It didn't matter to him; all people were equally beautiful in Steven's eyes.

"But what about your concert? What about the music?" Steven began to remember more and more. "Wait; my friends! I need to apologize for freaking out at them! And my dad! He needs to know where I am!"

"Don't worry about your friends or father," Apollo told him. "Focus on what's important."

"But..."

The trio exchanged glances, with Heca shrugging and looking out of the window. "I know what you idiots are going to do, and I want no part of it. God, you dumbasses are so predictable. One mention of music and you drop your entire demeanor."

"Says the woman who will get out of character if she gets complimented on her appearance!" Apollo retorted."

"I don't..." Steven began before Nero grabbed a small case from under his seat. Inside of it was a fiddle.

"Our concert might not be happening, but that doesn't mean I don't know how to play this thing," Nero narrowed his eyes. "One song. You get one song to pass the time. Once Lucci and the others arrive, it's back to business. Apollo, what do you want to sing?"

"Could...could I sing?" Steven gently asked. "It's kind of how I deal with stressful situations."

"If it keeps you pacified..." Nero started before getting a look from Apollo. "Err...keeps you happy, then sure. What tempo?"

After working out the details with Nero, the man began to fiddle

away. Finding the beat, Steven closed his eyes and started to sing. *"I awoke on this train, and I couldn't explain. I'd like to leave this place and find the friends I misplaced. And though I said I was mad at them, I would make it up and be friends again. Oh, Crystal Gems! I would like to make amends! Oh, Crystal Gems! All I want is to be there with my friends!"*

With that, he began to cry. The three members of CP9 just allowed it to happen, seemingly not caring about the boy's emotional state. However, they were interrupted by a knock at the car door. Apollo opened it and revealed a scary-looking man in a uniform. "Ah. Captain T-Bone. Is there an issue?"

"No, sir. It's just...this is going to be a journey of great importance and my men and I couldn't help overhearing the sweet sounds coming out of this car. I was wondering if you wouldn't mind performing for my men, just once, to improve their morale?" T-Bone requested.

"You really are that much of a softie for your men, aren't you?" Heca scoffed.

"It's up to the youth," Apollo explained as he pointed to Steven, who was wiping away his tears.

"Young man, your song has touched my men. Despite you being our..." T-Bone began.

"Guest," Apollo hastily cut-in.

"Guest, then..." T-Bone raised an eyebrow. "Would you be willing to help raise the spirits of my men? We have been on this train for hours and could use a bit of a morale boost to keep us going."

Selfless as ever and seeing a Marine who was as nice to him as Tashigi and Smoker were, Steven nodded and got up to follow the captain. Apollo and Nero did the same while Eirney Heca stayed behind.

When he arrived in the car housing T-Bone's men, Steven gave a gentle wave. "Um...hi. I heard you guys could use some cheering

up?"

The men were oddly quiet as they listened to the boy. Captain T-Bone moved to a seat and sat down. "I only wish for the best for my men! You all deserve this!"

"Captain T-Bone!" somebody shouted. "You always look out for us!"

"Now then, what are you going to sing?" Captain T-Bone asked the still-distraught youth.

"I...I'm not sure yet. Uh...oh!" Steven tried snapping himself out of it and focused his mind on being a good entertainer. "Has anyone here ever heard of 'When A Felon's Not Engaged In His Employment?'"

With that, Steven began to sing to the Marines. Amazingly, they all were REALLY getting into the music. This continued all throughout the song, which was making Steven forget about the issues he was dealing with once more.

That is, until he spied Nico Robin boarding the train.

"Robin!" Steven was floored. "You're here too?!"

"Steven?!" Robin asked frantically. "You shouldn't be here?! What are you doing here?!"

"I was asked to go on a mission to see the director...they wanted to talk to a Gem!" Steven started to get worried as he looked at the color draining off of Robin's face. "Are you okay? Are you part of this mission too?!"

"Steven, run! Get out of here! Get...oof!" Robin was stopped mid-sentence by the World Government agent escorting her.

"Move! You all can talk at Enies Lobby before your executions!" the man shouted as he pushed Robin through the door and away from Steven.

"ROBIN!" Steven started to cry again. Then he turned to Apollo and Nero, feeling even more hurt and betrayed than before. "What's

going on here?! What's REALLY going on here?!"

"I'd like to know the same thing," a new voice called out. Four individuals made their way into the car and stopped dead in their tracks as they surveyed the scene. "Why is the prisoner not cuffed and in his car?"

"You...you must be Rob Lucci," Apollo gulped and stretched out his hand. "Sir, I am..."

"I don't give a damn who you are. What I give a damn about is this prisoner! If you can't even keep a single child contained, then you have no place in CP9. The same goes for the weasel and the other one..." Lucci's eyes narrowed. "We have no tolerance for failures like you in our organization."

"But..." Nero tried to speak up before getting a death glare from the man.

"Kalifa, take the others to our car. I am going to have a long talk with our 'new recruits' to remind them exactly what is at stake here..." Lucci commanded. "Get that damned legacy that was posing as your sister there as well."

"Understood," Kalifa nodded.

"As for you, Captain T-Bone," Lucci directed his anger at the gaunt man. "I have heard tales of your days as a knight and your prowess as a swordsman. Do not let your devotion toward your men jeopardize this assignment."

"I apologize," he bowed. "I merely got carried away."

"See that you don't do so again," Lucci glared. "Between Nico Robin, Cutty Flam, and this...child, what this sea train is carrying is of great importance to the Gorosei and the World Government."

"Sir, I do not wish to overstep myself, but would you like us to guard over the prisoner while you are talking with...my superiors?" Captain T-Bone asked.

"As long as he is properly cuffed," Lucci started to walk away. "Time

is of the essence."

"Wait!" Steven called out. "I'm a prisoner?! I thought I was helping on a secret mission?!"

"We have a secret mission, young man," Kaku explained. "You are a criminal being escorted to our director before you get sent to Impel Down..."

With that, the members of CP9 left the room and Steven was once again outfitted with handcuffs. He was placed next to two Marines who were assigned to guard him. The boy was now even more emotionally destroyed than he was this morning. Not only was he distanced even more from the people that he loved, but now he was arrested by the World Government. He knew that pirating technically made him the bad guy in their eyes, but it hurt him regardless.

"I...I want my dad," Steven started to cry softly.

"You'll see Greg before you know it, kid," the Marine on his left told him.

The mention of his father's name caused Steven to jolt up. "What? How did you know my dad's name?!"

"What? We've been away for two days and you've forgotten about us already? That's funny! Kyahahahaha!" the Marine on his right laughed a very familiar laugh...one which Steven instantly recognized.

"Petrea?! Damian?!" Steven whispered.

He looked directly at his captors and saw it was indeed the former "Mr. 5 Pair." Somehow they had acquired Marine uniforms and managed to get on the sea train incognito.

"I...how...where is...?!" Steven stammered, tears continuing to fall down his face.

"Genevieve? She's up there in the luggage compartment," Damian pointed up. "You breathing up there, skippy?"

"Bite me!" the muffled voice of Genevieve called out.

Time stopped for Steven as he tried to process this unexpected development in a sea of unexpected developments. "I...I don't know what to say! This...this is amazing!" Steven went to hug them but realized he was still bound. He was saddened by that before he realized just what this meant. "We can escape! You can break me and Robin out! We can...wait...how has nobody realized that you are here?!"

"Our lovely painter friend tagged everybody earlier on our trip; even Evil Dead over there. We needed to catch a train and the only one running from Backslide to here was reserved for the Marines. Thankfully, we found some Marines that were just our size and fit right in!" Petrea smiled. Then she pointed up toward the grumbling painter. "Well...almost all of our sizes..."

"Still, we kind of don't have an escape plan thought up..." Damian admitted. "We didn't really know what we were walking into...I still don't. You've got a lot of explaining to do, buddy."

"But...but..." Steven could hardly process everything that was happening. Finally, he told them exactly what was on his mind. "*I have so many questions right now!*"

The fireman and the chocolatier exchanged glances and each cracked a smile. Finally, it was Petrea who responded to her young friend. "Why don't we start from the beginning and then you tell us what we have just walked into?"

The Adventures of the Baroque Works Trio

"That was six hours of my life I will never get back," Petrea groaned as she stepped off of the sea train. "Remind me to get ANY type of reading material here before we do that again."

The Baroque Works trio had finally arrived on Backslide Island, home of the auction house mentioned by the former Mr. 6 and (more famously) Pucci, the city of cuisine. It was a long, grueling wait to get there, but it would all be worth it to get some rare materials for the crew. It was a well-known fact amongst the members of the underworld (as the general public primarily focused on the elegant restaurants that populated the city) that the black market on this island was far smaller and more discreet than its only rival, which was found on the nearby St. Poplar, but there was a wide variety of materials that could be found here. If they truly needed seriously outlawed specialty material, they could always visit St. Poplar on the way home if the deal with Phil fell through. However, the former criminals had a goal in mind and they intended to follow it to the letter.

"It wasn't that bad of a ride," Damian pointed out, carrying both his bag and Petrea's, who was holding Connie's magical bag that contained the Golden Crown.

"The train ride wasn't bad; waiting with a drunk old woman, a child with a pet rabbit who thinks it is a cat, and you two sleeping your asses off was bad!" Petrea counted with a leering glance.

"To be fair, do you expect anything less from me?" Genevieve asked.

Petrea opened her mouth to protest before shutting it and shaking her head. "...I need a freaking drink."

"Why don't we find our, and I say this sarcastically, 'friend' with the stick first?" Genevieve rolled her eyes. "You two can get drunk after that."

"What? You're not going to try to join in for at least one celebratory drink?" Damian playfully joked.

"Discounting the fact that I'm underage and have no intentions of being a functional alcoholic like Zoro, drinking isn't something I'll ever be interested in. As a painter, I need to keep my head clear. I'd rather focus on the art and not get sloppy," Genevieve explained as they continued to walk off the train station.

"I thought most painters got drunk all the time," Damian commented.

"Crappy painters need an artificially created vision to get going," the painter sighed. "I'm different. I want my art to be purely me. Besides, most artists can't influence emotions using their paints. If I were to be out of it at all, the entire color and emotional spectrum would...well, it's too long to explain and I really don't have the energy to do so."

"And we don't have the energy to listen," Damian smirked. When the young girl shot him a death look, he immediately backed away.

"Joking! Joking!"

"Hrmp," Genevieve grunted.

"I might as well call our esteemed 'broker' now before we get caught up in anything else," Petrea told them, taking out the small Den Den Mushi she hid in Connie's magical bag. "It's an odd choice to meet here on this island for this kind of transaction, but what do I know? I'm only a former assassin with a body count higher than the patrons of these restaurants who has turned into a professional chocolatier and occasional pirate."

"That's a sentence you don't hear every day," Genevieve commented as Petrea attempted to reach the young man with the staff.

"Hello? Is that you, Valley Girl?" the familiar voice of Phil spoke out through the snail. "What the hell took you so long?"

"We missed our train and had to wait for the Puffing Tom to make it back to the station," Petrea sighed. "I take it you are on the island?"

"Honey, I've been living it up here! We picked a hell of a time to be here...but why spoil the fun? Where are you all at? I'll meet up with you and then we can grab some dinner..."

"Shouldn't we be meeting up with our client first...there is a client, right?" Petrea asked with malice, fearing the response.

"Join me and my partner for dinner and I'll tell you kids everything," Phil smugly replied.

"I'm fairly confident Damian and I are older than you..."

"And it shows on that lovely face of yours. I'm coming to you whether you like it or not, so why don't you just tell me where you are? Remember, I'm the one doing you a favor here so..."

Petrea bit her lip and groaned. "We just literally got off of the train...do the math..."

"As I expected," a voice called from behind her. The chocolatier jumped up in the air in shock, forcing herself to float back down as she glanced upon the grinning face of Phil. He was leaning on his staff and merely waved. "Come on! I'm not stupid...I just was waiting for the right opening to make myself known...How's it hanging, Bomb Voyage? Goldilocks?"

"...fine..." Genevieve kept her distance, trying to stay away.

"Phil, good to see you, man!" Damian smiled and extended his hand to shake it. He dropped the smile when he felt the girls' angry expressions piercing his soul. "What? He might be a bit annoying, but he's right up my alley!"

"You and me: simpatico," Phil grinned.

"While I'm...glad...one of us is having a good time, I think we should focus on..." Petrea tried to begin before getting silenced by Phil.

"Dinner first, focus later," he told her. "You don't outrank me anymore, Valley Girl. If I'm helping you guys out, we are doing it on my terms."

Realizing that fighting this was useless, Petrea lowered her head in resignation. "...since you're so insistent on this, you're buying."

"Sounds like a date!" Phil grinned. "I've already got us a reservation waiting with an old pal of mine lined up, so let's eat without delay!"

"How is it possible you got a reservation on this island this quickly?" Petrea raised an eyebrow.

The man shrugged. "You've just got to look for the places with openings in availability."

GWMAPT

"Mr. 6, you can't expect to come to a fine restaurant like this wearing such casual clothes like that!" a young girl began to scold the group as they walked into the exclusive Surasshu restaurant. She was wearing her hair up in a bun and had on a blue and white polka dot shirt and a waist dress with frilly lacing around her neck. Her cateye glasses were held together by a chain around her head. "But still, you look so precious despite that giant smudge on your face that makes you look like an idiot! Let me clean that up for you."

The Baroque Works trio merely stared at the sight of a girl clearly younger than Genevieve acting very doting while insulting Phil. He tried to resist it, but ended up giving in as she tried to make him look more presentable for a public meal. "There you go! Now a girl will actually look at you before realizing what kind of a degenerate you are!"

"I didn't know you cared," Phil muttered and rolled his eyes. "And don't call me 'Mr. 6!' You know that Baroque Works is over and..."

"Shhh..." she put her finger to his lips. "You have such a nice voice. Now isn't the time to use it."

"I like this kid," Petrea whispered.

"Oh! You found your little friends! Isn't that precious?" the little girl grinned before grabbing her dress and curtsying. However, her eyes narrowed as she looked the trio over. "Wait...have I seen you before?"

Petrea and Damian each shook their heads. However, Genevieve thought about it for a moment before allowing her eyes to widen. "Miss Mother's Day?!"

"Miss Mother's Day?!" Damian and Petrea repeated at the same time.

"That's little old me," she giggled. "And you are...?"

"They were our superiors," Phil groaned. "Mr. 5, Miss Valentine, and Miss Goldenweek...remember?"

"Oh! Silly me, how could I forget?" Miss Mother's Day bowed in apology. "I mean, it's not like you did a very good job at protecting us, but I'm sure you tried your best."

"We actually helped stop Crocodile and halt 'Operation: Utopia' in its tracks," Damian told her, looking her over in confusion.

"That's nice, sweetie," Miss Mother's Day nodded. "You also cost us job security and have forced us to stay hidden from the Marines."

"I...hey!"

"You guys seriously forgot about her?" Genevieve scolded them. "You can remember him but not her?"

"Not all of us are painters who remember nearly everything!" Petrea hissed.

"Now, now; listen to us talking here! Let's get a table already! I'm sure everybody is just as famished as I am," Miss Mother's Day interjected and signaled the host, who raised an eyebrow at the young girl in front of him. "Sir! Zuke, party of five! Is it possible to get a table next to the window?"

As the young girl proceeded to ask for service from a man much taller in a tuxedo, Phil started to scratch the back of his head. "Sorry about Baby Doll here...she takes the 'mother' in 'Miss Mother's Day' rather literally...despite nobody ever wanting her to..."

"Whispering is rude, honey!" she called out while still conversing

with the host.

"She's something for a little kid..." Petrea blinked several times in confusion and irritation. "I'm just surprised I don't remember her...then again, I deliberately put you out of my mind as soon as I met you..."

"Too much sherry will do that..." Genevieve spoke under her breath

"Ha! 'Little kid.' That's cute," Phil laughed.

Petrea thought about it for a moment and raised an eyebrow.

"She's...she's not a little kid, is she?"

"Nope."

"I get it! This is another Steven-like scenario!" Damian snapped his fingers. "She's a teenager!"

"Young man, that is rude!" Miss Mother's Day turned around and pointed her finger at him. "A lady never reveals her age!"

"Young man?" Damian repeated.

"She's a few years shy of thirty," Phil whispered. "But you didn't hear that from me."

As the trio stared in shock at the woman in question, she turned around and motioned for them to follow the host. Without questioning it, they followed along and prepared for an unforgettable dinner.

GWMAPT

"So, you've managed to escape capture from the Marines...by getting jobs in another dimension?" Miss Mother's Day (or Florida Zuke as the Baroque Works trio discovered) asked. "I swear, you kids have such an active imagination. It's adorable!"

The former criminals were all "enjoying" an incredibly fine-cooked meal with all of the works. Zuke, for her part, had been leading the conversation and had refused to let anybody talk about "work" at the

table. Instead, they had settled to discuss where everybody had ended up after Baroque Works fell. For his part, the only one who seemed to be enjoying himself at all was Damian, who had focused on the food and drink more than the conversation. Genevieve, on the other hand, had remained incredibly quiet, especially after the topic of how she and Mr. 3 recruited Phil...which was not a memory the painter wished to relieve under any circumstances.

"Look, believe us or don't. I don't care," Damian shrugged and took another bite of his brisket. "All I know is that I'm starting to get full and we STILL haven't discussed what we came here for..."

"No business at the table, hun," Zuke shook her head.

"You keep saying that, but that's the entire reason why we are here," Petrea's eye began to twitch. "At this point, I am REALLY starting to..."

"Petrea..." Damian warned. "Think of the kid."

The chocolatier took a giant breath and did her best to compose herself. "I...I am going to need another glass of sherry."

"Good for you, Valley Girl!" Phil gave her a thumbs up.

"Phil, I just have to ask," Damian began. "I thought the whole point of you leaving Foxy's crew was to strike out on your own? Why meet up with...?"

"With Baby Doll? Eh, I heard she happened to be in the area and figured 'what the hell?'" Phil shrugged. "Once this whole shindig is done, it's back to the solo life for me."

"Aww," Zuke tried to pinch his cheek before getting deflected. "A boy like you could get anyone! You don't need to be single all of your life, playing with your staff by yourself..."

"I am so glad the whole 'Utopia' thing never panned out," Petrea sighed as Phil began to argue with his former partner. "It would have turned into a dystopia reeeeeaaaally quickly if this was the kind of crap we'd deal with on a daily basis. Beach City is utopia enough for me."

"What about Onion?" Damian asked with a smile.

"Don't make me reconsider my stance on killing," Petrea narrowed her eyes. "I've been tested enough today..."

Looking flustered and afraid, Damian began to cough profusely. "So...uh...why were you in the area, anyway?" the bomb-man asked, trying to avoid Petrea's murderous glances.

"Me? Oh, there's this nice fellow on the other island who I will be negotiating to make a run for me to get some *special* supplies," she whispered.

There was silence at the table (save Phil munching on his food obliviously). Damian looked to his female companions and waited for somebody to speak up. Upon realizing nobody was going to acknowledge the comment, he took off his sunglasses and started to wipe them off. "...fine; I'll take the bait. What supplies are you getting?"

"Have you ever heard of Treasure Tree Adam wood?"

"Heh. You said 'treasure,'" Phil grinned, causing Damian to suppress a laugh. The ladies, on the other hand, merely stared and sighed at the stupidity of what he just said.

"I'll take the lack of response following my former partner's attempt at crude humor as a 'no.' It is some of the strongest wood in the world and it fetches quite a pretty berry. I've been couponing and saving every berry I could just to get nine feet of it..." Zuke explained, stopping as Phil began to howl with laughter. She hit him in the back of the head and wagged her finger at him. "Manners! We are in public! Regardless, a small girl like me needs a way to protect herself. I've heard that pieces of this tree was worth a lot, but even I wasn't expecting to pay as much as the small fortune I'm going to have to pay..."

"You're paying that much...for wood..." Damian raised an eyebrow.

"Stop feeding into this!" Petrea hissed.

"This isn't just any wood! It is some of the strongest wood in the

world! It's not invincible, mind you, but it is strong enough to practically deflect cannon fire!" Zuke clapped her hands excitedly. "I'm just lucky any of it managed to be found, especially since my supplier told me that the majority of it was already spoken for by a buyer who called ahead!"

"So, the asking price is for its durability and rarity? What could you possibly need to spend that kind of money on?"

"Please, that's easy," Phil chortled. "She's trying to make a new club to replace that dingy one she had! What happened? Did it break?"

"Oh, so that was your theme? You both use stick-like weapons!" Damian snapped his fingers. "I was wondering about that!"

"Oh no," Petrea groaned as she buried her head in her hands, knowing what was about to happen.

With that, the former Miss Mother's Day dropped her motherly demeanor and stood up with Phil following suit. Anger flared on her face as she took off her glasses, allowing them to hang on its chain. "Listen to me, 'Mr. 5!' If you EVER call my club a stick again, I'll tan your hide with all nine feet of it and force tabasco sauce down your throat."

"And it's a staff! A STAFF!" Phil added, grabbing the object in question and shaking it. "Does this look like a stick?!"

"Uh..." Damian gulped, clearly taken back by their passionate responses.

"*ENOUGH!*" Genevieve snapped, finally speaking and glaring at every patron in the restaurant. "I'M DONE! I'm done with this prattle, I'm done with the stories, and I'm done with all of this!"

"What's the matter, Goldilocks? I only told them the story about why I called you a finger painter..." Phil adopted a serious look on his face, taken back by the outburst.

"A STORY I FORCED OUT OF MY HEAD!" the young girl snarled, showing anger that was practically unheard of for her. "If you two can't help us, then we have no further business here! If you can,

stop wasting our time!"

A silence fell over the restaurant as Genevieve began to pant. Her eyes widened in shock and she sat back down in her seat, her rosy cheeks blushing harder than usual. "I'm sorry...please forgive me for ruining your meals..." she whispered.

As the patrons went about their business (giving a glance at the quintet of former criminals), all Damian and Petrea could do was look on in worryment at their friend. However, it was Phil who broke the ice and folded his hands on the table. "I...wow. I've never seen you open up like that before...and I don't think I want to again. If the lady wants to talk business, let's talk business. So, after you called me up the other day, I put out some calls and enlisted this one here to see if she knew anyone. It turns out that, through mutual acquaintances, we could get in contact with this guy who is crazy about rare gold...and a guy who happens to be loaded enough to pay any asking price if it is up his alley."

"And this person happens to be...?" Petrea asked.

"The captain of the Treasure Pirates: Mad Treasure," Phil told them.

"Okay, what's his actual name? I know nicknames are your thing, but if we are going to meet this guy..." Damian began before noting Phil's confused expression. "What?"

"Look, I don't know what you're talking about. That's his name: Mad Treasure. If you've got a problem with it, take it up with his parents," Phil chuckled.

"Oh," Damian blushed. "That's unfortunate."

"As I was saying before Bomb Voyage had his snarky comment, Mad Treasure is all about the thrill of the treasure hunt. Usually buying gold isn't his thing, but a giant, golden eggshell? That caught his attention. He'll be waiting for us at the Sugar Tavern by the Molisee Farmer's Market in the morning to talk to us before the big auction begins, which I'd sit in on if I were you..."

"When you say auction..." Petrea raised an eyebrow warily.

"I mean an auction of rare goods and supplies. Word on the underworld grapevine is that tomorrow, there is going to be reselling a large order a certain pirate had placed when he assumed he was going to topple a certain country..." Phil grinned. "I assume you know which one I am taking about."

That got the attention of the trio, snapping Genevieve back to the conversation at hand. "Crocodile?"

"Yes, him. Our former meal ticket," Zuke sighed theatrically. "Such a shame...defeated by Marines...who'd have guessed that someone like him would be taken down by a Marine captain."

"That's just a cover story," Damian interjected. "He was defeated by the combined efforts of our captain, the kid, and a giant woman made up of three smaller women!"

Silence fell over the table once more as Phil and Zuke tried to find an appropriate reaction while Petrea slapped her face in frustration. "You...you could have worded that ANY other way..."

"Aaaaaaanyway," Phil coughed, signaling a complete disregard of Damian's comment. "I managed to get a good look at what's on the docket tomorrow thanks to a nice opening in their security system that I exploited and learned about two very interesting items up for auction...the two big ticket items of the entire shebang."

He produced a paper and slid it on the table, where it was promptly snatched up by Petrea. She examined it as fast as she could until her eyes stopped at the bottom of the page. They began to widen as she looked from the page to Genevieve and then back to Phil. "This...this is real?"

"Swiped it myself. Why would I lie?"

"Give me that!" Damian grabbed it and did the same thing. After a few moments, he pulled the paper closer to his face and just stared at it. "Holy shit...how did...?"

"I may have gotten bored at some point of the past week of waiting here and decided to see what's been going on behind the scenes."

For an infamous auction house, it's got really crappy security. Once you see all the flaws and openings, it becomes a game to see just what you could do and not get caught. When I saw that these were being sold, I may have forged some documents and bumped up the auction to coincide with when you guys would get here based on your location..." Phil whistled innocently. "What can I say? If I'm getting a cut of this, I might as well make it worth your while. What are old friends for, right?"

"Can someone pass me that?" Genevieve said, trying the entire time Phil was speaking to reach the paper that Damian had put down.

"Sure, honey," Zuke smiled and grabbed the paper and handed it to her. "It's so cute how you are lazier than a sloth."

"...thanks for that 'compliment,'" Genevieve muttered as she began to skim the page. It took her longer than her friends, but she eventually made it down to the last items being sold. "Wait...'Speed-Speed Fruit?' 'Color-Color Fruit?'" There are DEVIL FRUITS here?! Crocodile had Devil Fruits on order?!"

"It makes sense, doesn't it?" Petrea looked like her mind was running a mile a minute. "If Crocodile truly wanted to turn Alabasta into some kind of utopia or whatever else his endgame was, he'd want his best people to have the best abilities at his disposal to keep the Marines off of his back."

"Meaning his Officer Agents!" Damian snapped his fingers together. "Of course! The only two Officer Agents that didn't have Devil Fruit powers were Mr. 4, who was slower than molasses, and..."

All eyes fell on Genevieve, who had put down the paper and had an unreadable expression on her face. "...and me."

"I'm guessing that our bossman didn't learn about your attempts to join the rubber-band man until it was too late to cancel the order," Phil commented. "The question, Goldilocks, is what are you gonna do about all of this?"

As the girl fell silent once more and clearly started to have a long conversation with herself in her head, Phil raised his hand to signal

the waiter. "Whelp, I'd say this warrants a 'check please!'"

GWMAPT

Later that night, Genevieve sat alone on her bed in the bedroom of a hotel on the island. It was not too expensive to buy for one night considering the luxurious nature of the island and it allowed for a nice environment. Petrea and Damian went down to check out the bar while the young painter ate some rice crackers that Steven and Connie packed for her when they were getting ready the night before. As such, she was left alone with her thoughts.

The concept of there being a Color-Color Fruit was certainly one that Genevieve honestly never thought of. It was not that she had pride in the fact that she was the only Officer Agent who did not have a Devil Fruit or wielded a weapon that ingested one, but she felt at least a sense of satisfaction. The manipulation of color hypnosis was a trait that she had picked up at a young age, one of the few things that she truly worked hard for. Painting was her escape and joy; thankfully, her parents encouraged her passion and never once tried to stifle her creativity. When she came across a long-forgotten method of bending colors to her whim in an old art book that was found at an old flea market (from what she gathered, it was from an old library that burned down years before she was born), she made it her mission to see that to the end.

The toll it took on her at a young age was seen almost immediately. The members of her family were never the most active individuals, but the effort it took her to learn how to essentially learn color hypnosis drained her and caused every movement to become a battle. By the time those feelings passed, Genevieve had truly embraced an almost comically lazy lifestyle. The only thing that could get her to become active again was her art, which she embraced immediately.

It was not long before she tried to submit work into an art show, which made waves around the West Blue. At one of her shows, she struck up a conversation with an older individual with glasses who was quite interested in her work. He could see the energy behind every brushstroke and appreciated her material for what it was. The man in question's name was unknown to her, and he happened to

have been approached by a woman calling herself Miss All Sunday about joining a newly formed group. He accepted only on the terms that he could have a partner with similar interests as him. As such, he set out to find the perfect candidate of his own by scoping out art shows and art schools to find someone worthy to be by his side.

Upon learning exactly what Genevieve could do with paint, the man offered her the position right then and there. Using the same rhetoric that Miss All Sunday used with him, he convinced the girl that a utopia where she could paint to her heart's desire would be worth leaving home and any sacrifices it would require. For someone who truly wanted to make a name for themselves in the world and for someone who was too young to question such matters, how could she refuse?

After climbing the ranks with the man and gaining the title of "Miss Goldenweek," Genevieve found solace with what she was doing. She had gotten (belatedly) her parents' approval on the matter of setting out to sea and was being exposed to a whole new world of painting techniques. By expanding her skills from canvases to wax sculptures, Genevieve managed to grow and gain new techniques. Unfortunately, she was focusing more on her art than her morals. Any time she would feel any kind of regret for what she was doing, she would justify the means with the hopes for her utopian dream...for her chance to become the greatest painter in the world. It didn't help that the man, or Mr. 3 as he was now known, romanticized the concept of criminality. After so many times of hearing it, she accepted it as a traditional part of life...

Until she met an odd boy who reminded her just how the world worked...who reminded her that she was capable of so much more than what she was doing with Baroque Works...who paved the way for her to meet a pirate captain who accepted her for her and not just for her abilities.

The question Genevieve kept asking herself was how to approach the subject of this Devil Fruit. If she were to obtain it, would it lessen her dream? Did it take away from the title if she was given such an advantage or would doing so allow her to experience a whole new world? Would it be advantageous to eat a Devil Fruit at all? Would the ends justify the means? Would she be able to say that her art

was purely her own, or would she be just as bad as the drunks who needed a buzz to paint?

"Berry for your thoughts?" the slurred voice of Petrea entering the room snapped her out of her introspective and brought her back to reality.

"I dunno. How was drinking like a lush?" Genevieve playfully asked, trying to downplay her own insecurities about this new development.

"I am NOT a lush!" Petrea barked before nearly tripping on the floor. "I can hold my own just fine!"

"You redefine the term 'lightweight.'"

"You're just lucky I like you..." Petrea rolled her eyes and sat down on the bed next to her. She noticed the box of rice crackers and the discarded paper next to it. "I take it you are still mulling it over?"

"There's a lot to take in..." Genevieve admitted. "The pros and cons seem to balance each other out."

"Hmm...well, what about that time in Alabasta? If you had Devil Fruit powers, Steven would have drowned and died," Petrea reminded her.

"True, but what about how I was useless fighting Crocodile's pets since I lost my paints?" Genevieve countered. "I am useless if I don't have my materials! I'm not strong, I'm not fast, I'm...I'm a liability."

"Genevieve, I'm not here to tell you what you should or shouldn't do, but I'll tell you this: you are FAR from a liability," Petrea told the girl. "Whatever you decide to do, everyone will back you up. However, I wouldn't talk like that again to anyone. Do you want Steven or Luffy giving you some kind of inspirational talk for hours?"

"Oh god. I don't think I have it in me right now," Genevieve tried to suppress a laugh, but failed. "I guess I'll just sleep on it."

"Sounds like a good plan. Move over; I need to crash. The room is starting to spin..." the chocolatier groaned and plopped her head on the nearby pillow. "That's the last time I listen to Damian and let a

stranger buy us drinks..."

"Is that where he is? Partying with some random guy you met at the bar?"

"Yeah...some weirdo in a speedo came in with two women waving a bunch of money around claiming something about not wanting to have any left over after some giant purchase he made...I dunno anymore," Petrea muttered as she attempted to drunkenly take off her earring and place them on the nearby nightstand. "Look, are you okay?"

The painter nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I am.."

"Good..." the blonde yawned. Within seconds, she was out cold. Taking pity on her, Genevieve attempted to put a blanket over her slumbering form. At first, she stopped midway through, internally citing laziness. However, she reconsidered and managed to get her tucked into bed. Staring at her work, Genevieve couldn't help but sigh.

"I bet she only had one drink."

GWMAPT

The next day, the Baroque Works left a large breakfast full while dealing with the after-effects of the night before. While Genevieve was fine and Petrea merely had a small headache, Damian had a major hangover that could be seen all over his face. He was chewing a painkiller that was clearly not working. "...you know that drinking a glass of water for every drink you've taken would have..."

"Stop. Rubbing. It. In. My. Face. Petrea," Damian grunted and rubbed his head. "If I ever see that speedo-guy again, I'm gonna make him feel like I feel now..."

"Sober up and get ready for today's bullshit," Petrea sighed and reached into Connie's bag. "If this meeting goes well, we'll have about two hours before the auction. We can go if you want, but we can't dawdle. If we miss our train, we are stuck here for another night."

"God no!" Damian winced dramatically. "My body couldn't take another night like that!"

"Didn't you say that guy already left on the first sea train? Why would he come back?" Genevieve asked as they walked.

Damian opened his mouth and shut it. "I'm...I'm just going to shut up now..."

"Now then," Petrea began and pulled out a small handwritten list. "This is a list of a requests from everyone in the crew. We need to budget whatever profit we make to get these essentials."

"What is even on there?" Genevieve asked, legitimately curious.

"Hmm...Luffy wrote 'chocolate-covered meat...'" Petrea gagged in disgust. "I mean, apparently chocolate-covered bacon is a thing, but this is just wrong...okay, Zoro wants a sword magazine. That should be simple enough. Nami wants...the leftover profit..."

"I'd have been shocked if it was anything else," Genevieve rolled her eyes.

"Usopp said to see if there was any special ammunition...Damian, do you think Lamar still operates in the farmer's market?" Petrea asked her ailing partner.

"...probably. It's been a few months, but I doubt he'd have moved," Damian replied as he rubbed his head.

"Lamar's an arms dealer who has a produce stand here," Petrea explained to the lost painter, who now only looked more confused. "That's how the black market here works. The island gets its fresh ingredients for its restaurants from the farmer's market while the owners of the stands use them as a front for their side businesses. Did Mr. 3 never come here with you?"

"Mr. 3 was too stuck-up for something like this," Genevieve commented. "Is this 'Lamar' a friend of yours?"

"He's the man who modified my South Blue revolver to work with my Devil Fruit...the one I used before become a firefighter. I really

should have brought it here, but I wasn't expecting to need to use it," Damian shrugged and put his hands in his pocket. "Man, I better not be getting too sloppy. I was a damn good shot at my prime. Part of me misses those days..."

"Back when we were ruthless sadists?" Petrea smiled.

"Hey, you were the sadist. I was just ruthless. Hell, you're still a sadist! I heard what you did to that guy on Mecha Island."

Petrea's cheeks blushed as red as Genevieve's. "I...that is...moving on!" Petrea coughed and reexamined the list. "Sanji just wants new cutlery and nonstick pans, Chopper...huh? He just wants some flowers? Have either of you heard of Mohs Island?"

"Nope," Damian shook his head before clutching it again. "Gah! It hurts!"

"Can't say that I have," Genevieve admitted.

"Well, Chopper asked for some flowers from this island...oh well. Nothing from Robin or the Gems...except Amethyst, who just wants some trash? I...just...Kyahahaha!" she couldn't help but laugh. "I love that Gem. I swear it."

"Anything else on that list of demands that we don't even know that we can pay for?" Genevieve asked. "Who knows if we'll even make money off of that idiot's contact..."

"Look, let's try to stay positive about this...as painful as it sounds," Damian winced. "I have faith in him."

"I'm glad somebody does," Genevieve commented dryly. "So...the list?"

"Right," Petrea finished looking down and raised an eyebrow. "Nothing for Greg, Connie asked for something unique to the Grand Line, and Steven...just wants us to come back safe."

"I swear that kid is a saint...the real kind, not a Celestial Dragon," Damian added hastily, suddenly remembering Petrea's dislike of the World Nobles.

"True as that may be, we have to be at the tavern in thirty minutes. Let's keep up the pace!" Genevieve told them, moving unnaturally fast to reach their destination, something that was not lost on her friends.

"Genevieve...are you...?" Petrea started to ask.

"I'm fine. Let's get this over with."

Realizing that she was not going to talk about what was really bothering her any more than she did the previous night, Petrea could do nothing more than accept that she wanted to deal with it herself. Instead, she primed herself to deal with a young man she considered to be one of the bigger annoyances she had come across in her years on the Grand Line.

In quickening their pace to leave Pucci to get to the tavern, they moved away from several ships that were docked near the restaurant scene. If they had traveled a different route, they would have noticed the Marine ships that had just docked there. While several Marines had left the ship in plainclothes to enjoy a nice meal for a vacation, three of their number stood out. One was an odd man wearing heart-shaped sunglasses, a Marine hat, and an odd protrusion coming off of his chin; another was a man with pink hair and metal plates screwed into his hands. However, the one who exuded the most authority was a woman with pink hair in a burgundy suit. Smoking a cigarette, she glanced around and motioned for her two male subordinates to come close.

"You two: Fullbody and Jango," the woman commanded to them. "Hina is holding you two responsible for checking into our reservations and corralling the men for our meal. Hina is going to explore the island a bit before lunch."

"YES, CAPTAIN HINA!" the two shouted enthusiastically.
"ANYTHING YOU SAY!"

Captain Hina lit a cigarette and began to walk away from the fawning men. "Good. Hina has heard quite a few things about this island and wants to see for herself..."

GWMAPT

"Boy, and here I thought that you weren't gonna show," Phil called to the trio inside of the bar. It was a small enough that business could be done comfortably, but large enough to ensure privacy against eavesdroppers.

At the table where Phil and Zuke were sitting were three individuals. The lone female of the group was slim, had big puffy brown hair, and appeared to be very drunk. The smaller male wore small sunglasses and a giant pink parka. The larger male, however, also wore sunglasses but was completely shirtless, exposing his muscular frame. He had wildly spiky purple hair and several gear-like tattoos on his body. Around his shoulders and neck were metal chains. It was quite apparent that he was both the most intimidating member and the clear leader of the trio.

"So, this is them? The individuals who found a mythical crown made of gold? Jarararara!" the man laughed. "You don't look like much!"

"Says the man with the name called 'Mad Treasure,'" Damian (who had either gotten over his hangover or was ignoring it) countered and went to shake his hand. "The name's Damian and I speak behalf of my friends when I thank you for answering our broker's call."

"On behalf of the Treasure Pirates, I accept!" Mad Treasure returned it. "These two are my top men. The lady here is Naomi Drunk and my parka-wearing associate is Psycho P."

"Howdy," Naomi nodded and returned her attention to the bottle of rum she was chugging, clearly living up to her name.

"Salutations, my new friends. Let's start this meeting so it can end," Psycho P rhymed.

Suppressing the urge to make any more side commentary at the rouges in front of them, the trio introduced themselves and sat down at the table. Petrea clutched the small bag in her hand, curious to see how this would play out. She could not get a reading on these pirates yet, but if she was forced to fight them for any reason, she

would not hesitate to get her hands dirty.

Maybe she *was* still a sadist?

"Gentlemen, ladies, and anyone in between," Phil attempted to call everyone to attention. "Our schedule has no room for intros so let's accelerate right to why we all are here. The three of them have shown interest in something the three of you have obtained. How and why you have it, I have no idea. Regardless, you kids haggle it out while I grab a drink. Anyone need a round?"

"Get me a bottle of whatever the hell this is," Drunk told him.

"Spoken like a functional alcoholic!" Phil laughed as he walked away.

"Now that he is out of the way," Mad Treasure took a deep breath. "Let's talk treasure."

"Treasure as in you or the gold we have in this bag?" Damian asked, eliciting Petrea to whack him in the back of the head. "Hey! I'm still hungover!"

"That's no excuse for rudeness!" Petrea glared. "I do apologize for him."

"Don't apologize. I never do," the shirtless man replied.

"Regardless, you want to talk treasure? Let's talk treasure." Petrea then lifted Connie's bag up onto the table, careful to never let go of it. "Gentlemen and lady, inside of this bag is the broken pieces of a pure gold eggshell belonging to a giant sea turtle."

"I really can't see at all," Psycho P cocked his head. "How it can fit in a bag so small."

"It's a magic bag given to us by a weirdo with a talking fanny pack. Don't worry about it. I can show you what we have in here and then we can discuss suitable payment." Petrea began to empty the contents of the bag onto the table and then the floor when it was apparent that it could not withstand the weight of the gold.

As Psycho P and Naomi Drunk began to fawn over just how much gold was being produced in front of them, Mad Treasure kept a neutral face. He picked up a piece and examined it, sliding his hand on the inside of the gold. "And the remnants on this side...you're saying that this was formerly an egg...a single egg?"

"That is correct," Petrea folded her arms and adopted a serious look. "We are prepared to listen to any offers you find to be acceptable for the quality and quantity of gold we have. If you don't want it, I am sure we can take it to a local gold exchange..."

"Now here's the question: what's to say..." Psycho P drew a sword out and pointed it at the woman. "We won't just take it on our way?"

Before the room could get tense, the man in the parka found a staff directly pointing at the back of his head. "There are at least seven working defenses using this staff from this position based on the openings in your stance and grip. Three of them disarm with minimal contact. Three of them kill. The last..." Phil darkly commented, tapping the staff to the back of his neck. "...hurts. This is intended to be a nice, friendly meeting. If you escalate it any further, I guarantee you that you will regret it."

There was silence in the tavern as everyone waited for somebody to make a move. Psycho P clutched the hilt of his sword, Naomi darted her eyes toward a discarded bow, Zuke slipped her hand under the table, Damian began to pick his nose, and Petrea merely smiled. The only two who did nothing were Genevieve and Mad Treasure. Finally, the latter individual began to laugh his distinctive laugh. "Jararara! Put down your arms, my friends! My ship mate here meant nothing my the disrespect. He is just very eager for later on today. Pay him no mind. As the captain of this group, I would refuse to allow this treasure to be stolen. On the contrary, that would be meaningless."

The man began to survey the tavern, watching as the other patrons went back to their drinks. Once he was sure that the only people in the room who had eyes on him were at this table (and the bartender, but who could blame her?), he began to speak again. "Money is no object in my crew. I have plenty of that. Gold is practically commonplace as well. Do you know what I don't have enough of?

The thrill of the hunt."

He picked up a piece of the gold and showed it to everyone present. "I want this gold not for its value in berries, but rather what it represents! If this eggshell is as new as you say it is, it stands to reason the remainder of the eggs are no more than a few days away. Think of the hunt my men and I would have trying to backtrack and find where you found this."

"Good luck with that," Damian snorted. "The island can't be found by Log Pose. It's on the mother turtle's back."

"And that, good sir, is worth every berry that I will pay you for this. You have sparked my interest and have given me yet another reason to go on...a reason to get up in the morning. A treasure hunt is no fun without risk! Name your price," Mad Treasure told them.

"Sir, is that wise? The horde is quite the size..."

"Psycho P, I have enough for you to buy the Color-Color Fruit. Whatever amount they ask for is no great loss to me."

The sound of coughing filled the air as everybody acknowledged Genevieve, who was clearly in shock. "You...you've heard about the Color-Color Fruit?!"

"Yeah, we did. I can't wait to bid. To make our crew formidable, I'm gonna become invisible!" Psycho P laughed.

The painter glared in sheer shock at the parka-wearing pirate. When she found her words, she apparently could not control the shaking sounds of her voice. "You...you...you would use the Color-Color Fruit...to become *invisible*?!"

"Our dumbass here is rather straightforward and not much of a creative type," Drunk acknowledged, finishing another swig from her bottle. "We paid good money to learn what would be happening today and that's the best he could think of."

"That fruit would be wasted on you! There are so many things you could do with a color-themed Devil Fruit! Why?! Why would you want it for such a trivial use?!" Genevieve asked, clearly more

offended than she had been in her entire life.

"It's practical and useful, very true. You seem quite angry. What's it to you?"

The painter glared directly at the man's sunglasses, finally getting up and leaving the bar. Confused, Mad Treasure pointed at the door. "Is there a problem here?"

"Forget her. She's been moody since we got here," Petrea commented, trying to keep focused on the situation. "Given the amount of gold present and the information about the location, would you agree to one hundred and eighty million?"

The shirtless man thought about it and examined the piece in his hand once more. The table collectively held its breath as Petrea extended a hand for a shake. Finally, the treasure hunting pirate met hers and shook on it. "You drive a hard bargain. Psycho P, pay the lady."

Psycho P went to the other side of the bar and grabbed a suitcase. From inside of his parka, he began to pour berry after berry into it, all to the amazement of Petrea and Damian. As money exchanged hands and the gold was divided by the three pirates and several others who were sitting in the bar. It became very apparent that the majority of the patrons were actually members of the Treasure Pirates. Raising an eyebrow, Petrea couldn't help but ask what was on her mind. "If all of these people were in your crew, what was stopping you from attacking him when he threatened your man?"

"I told you," Mad Treasure grinned. "I'm not in this for the money. I could have taken this at any time. But I would have never obtained that information truthfully. For that, you have my thanks."

Carrying their prize, the Treasure Pirates left the tavern practically empty. The four remaining former members of Baroque Works opened up the briefcase and just stared blankly at the large amount of money they had acquired in a short amount of time. Finally, Petrea started to count out a series of bills and handed it to Phil. "Tell me, 'Mr. Broker,' is thirty percent enough of a cut for you? Fifty-four million berries for the two of you?"

"I...yeah..." Phil whistled. "Easiest berries I've ever made. What about you, kiddo? Is this enough to make your sti..."

Before Phil could finish the sentence, the small, childlike woman put her finger to his lips. "Don't ruin this moment, honey. I don't want to have to gut you at a time like this. But there should be more than enough here to cover any costs combined with all of the money I have saved up over the years...although I won't know until I talk to the nice man in St. Poplar..."

"Fine! I'll go with you to St. Poplar so you can get your club. Yeesh!" the former Mr. 6 threw his hands up, trying to back away as his old partner went in for a celebratory hug. "But that's it! Then it's back to the open sea for me for a rejuvenated and renewed adventure!"

"That sounds like fun. Good luck with that, man," Damian told him as he extended his hand. "Thanks for everything, buddy. You really saved our asses."

"Hey, you guys did me a solid a few weeks back. I owed you one," Phil shrugged. Then he acknowledged Petrea and nodded his head. "I guess you are finally rid of me, Valley Girl."

"Wait!" the blonde called to the now-moving duo before they could leave the bar. "I just wanted...thank you for intervening on my behalf, Phil. While unnecessary, it was appreciated."

The young man grinned, taken back at her actually using his name. "Any time, Valentine."

It was now Petrea's turn to go and shake Phil's hand. "Until the next time. The same to you, Miss Florido."

With that, the quartet parted ways as Damian went to collect their remaining money. The former Officer Agent grabbed a small stack and gave to the bartender for her troubles. Their business concluded, Petrea and Damian left the establishment to see Genevieve sitting outside of the tavern, lost in thought once more.

"Whelp, we're rich and you don't have to see him anymore!" Damian told painter. "I figured you'd be happy to hear that!"

"He's...he's going to waste it," Genevieve muttered softly.

The pair exchange confused glances. "You mean the money? Eh, who knows? If he wants to use it to help his partner get a club, who are we to judge?"

"Not him! I'm talking about that rhyming guy in the parka! If he eats that fruit, it will be wasted on him! He wants to use it for camouflage and nothing more! That fruit deserves someone with a sense of creativity!" Genevieve passionately told them. "That fruit...that fruit...when is the auction?"

Petrea opened up the now-lighter bag and found the paper with the information Phil passed along to them. She scanned the document until she found what she was looking for. "In about two hours. Does this mean...?"

"It means we are getting supplies for the crew," Genevieve told them in a serious voice. "And then we are buying that Devil Fruit."

GWMAPT

"They seem like nice folks," Zuke prattled on as Phil was forced to listen to her continuously. "This was almost enough to forgive them for defecting and costing us a country."

"Do you honestly think Crocodile would have actually done what he said?" Phil asked, far more realistic about the reputation of his former employer. "Do you really think a utopia was in the cards for us at all?"

"The man paid well...that was enough for me."

The former Mr. 6 decided to end the argument there. If he tried to reason with her, this last trip would be beyond torturous. To be fair, he had no true ill-will toward his former partner, but he was done with crowds and people in general. Truthfully, Phil was looking forward to sitting on the sidelines and watching the world collapse on itself. He had no doubt a crew like the Straw Hats had the ability to do great things and he was open to catching up on their exploits if time allowed it.

However, he would do so alone and by his own admission. Phil was a unique individual in that if he truly wanted to, he could (by his own admission) take the world by storm. He would open their eyes to the horror of the World Government and tear down everything that they built. But he was very cautious as to not make waves. Working under Crocodile in secrecy allowed protection and Foxy just allowed him to be a faceless goon in the crowd.

Now, however, was not a time for reflection; rather, it was a time to begin anew and recall the joys of sailing on the sea once more. Nothing could stop that from happening...

"Did you listen to what I just told you?!" Zuke slapped the backside of Phil's head. "Stop daydreaming and 'open' your eyes, since you love that verb so much!"

Phil stopped actively trying to ignore what she was saying to following her advice, something he rarely did even back when they were partners. Sure enough, the area near the sea train station was full of activity from very specific types of people: Marines. Half of the group appeared to be in plainclothes, their position given away by them continuing to wear their stupid issued hats, while the other group was in full uniform. Of note was an odd-looking Marine with heart sunglasses talking to a fully uniformed Marine who looked like a zombie. The one who (barely) looked the most alive was holding a Den Den Mushi in his hands, which was passed along to the near-dead individual.

"The Marines? I wonder what they are doing here?" Phil thought aloud.

"Maybe they are here for a good meal? Come on, we need to get going if we want to make that last sea train!"

"You go on ahead...that guy right there. He's familiar...where do I know him from?" Phil stared at the gaunt man speaking into the receiver before recognition finally hit. "Holy...that's Captain 'Ship Cutter' T-Bone! This must be serious..."

"Ugh! Don't get yourself into trouble! If the sea train leaves, I'll never forgive you!" Zuke threw her hands up in protest.

"I just want to eavesdrop a little...it won't be long..." Phil veered his path to get in earshot of the two of them. It might be nothing or it might prove useful about where to avoid sailing to.

"...are you sure you'd be fine with my men taking your reservation?" T-Bone was saying.

"Hina does not mind. Let your men eat well before you go on your mission. What are you even doing?"

"I couldn't tell you. All I know is that it is a security detail...what about you?"

"Something big seems like it will be going down here and I want to be there for it," the snail replied in a female voice. "Jango, you are responsible for rounding up the troops, having them get in uniform, and assembling on the other side of the island to await further orders."

"YES, CAPTAIN HINA!"

"But aren't your men on vacation? It's your rest time and..." T-Bone continued. At this point, Phil's distance between them and him was increasing, meaning that it was getting harder and harder to pick up on their conversation naturally.

"Hina will make it up to them tonight. Hina passed a karaoke bar and..."

"KARAOKE!" the one called Jango cheered.

"...I catch your meaning. I don't suppose I could as a favor from you then? Would you and your men be willing to watch after our ship while we board the train?" T-Bone asked hopefully.

"It doesn't matter. We are here for the next few days to rest. What is one more ship to watch?"

"You have my deepest appre..." the captain bowed graciously to the snail, finally out of Phil's range.

The young man mulled everything over. The Marines were here, but

some were leaving by a sea train before the night was over. Another Marine was on the other side of the island, preparing to mobilize on a target...and that is what caused Phil to realize just what was happening.

"Shit; they'll be ambushed!" Phil rubbed his head, trying to think of what he could do. His sea train was just about to leave and it was clear the next one was not going to be one to board. There was not enough time to warn them about it...unless...

Upon catching back up to Zuke, who had gotten two tickets for the next train to St. Poplar, Phil grabbed his personal Den Den Mushi and picked up the transceiver. "Come on, dear! The train is going to leave before we know it! What could possibly be so important that you need to call someone now?"

"One last favor...and don't call me 'dear!'" Phil told her. "...for my friends...pick up! Pick up! Damn it, what could they be doing?!"

GWMAPT

"Valentine. Five," a dark-skinned man with a hat nodded at his produce stand as the Baroque Works trio walked up to it, not knowing that the Den Den Mushi in Connie's bag was going off. "When I heard about the rest of your club but didn't hear about you, I assumed you died. Glad to see I was proven wrong."

"Lamar," Damian returned the nod. "I knew you'd still be shucking fruit. Business going well?"

"Eh. It is what it is," Lamar shrugged. He looked down at Genevieve and raised an eyebrow. "Did you guys adopt? Is that what happened to you?"

"Rude!" Petrea playfully knocked him on the arm. "She was also part of the...organization with us. She actually was our superior."

"I'd believe it," Lamar chuckled. He picked a strawberry from his stand and offered it to the young painter. "Care for a taste?"

"I'll pass. Listen, we've almost got everything on the list. I'm going to save us a seat at the auction. When you're done here, find me."

Lamar, thanks for the offer," the painter told him and immediately went walking in the direction of the Quartey Auction House.

"Fun kid. What was she on about? You're here grocery shopping?"

Petrea held up Connie's bag and gave it a wave. "Supply run for our ship. Everything from flowers for our doctor to fresh cocoa beans in specially sealed containers for me."

"So, you're pirates now. I get it. Regardless, who am I to judge? I take it that you stopping here was not purely a social call?" Lamar pried, his hands placed behind his stand. "Or are you here to stop and taste the strawberries?"

"Actually, I would love to buy some of..." Petrea began before getting stopped by Damian.

"Look, our sniper asked if you had any rare ammunition or anything that can be used as ammunition...plus, I'd kill for another one of those South Blue revolvers you had last time."

"You lost the flint-lock? Five, I'm disappointed. I had that specially tailored for your 'talents,'" Lamar shook his head. "For shame. The only thing I have that'd be up your alley is a gun that looks like a cork-gun...it's designed to fool your opponent, but it still packs a punch. Trust me, it'll work well-enough, but it just won't have that personal feel."

Damian was then handed a cork-gun with a bright blue handle, looking right out of a cartoon. He looked it over and started to laugh. "Man, this is so stupid that it comes around to being awesome. It will do nicely for now! I left the old one at my...home base...and didn't realize that I would need it. It sounds sketchy, but..."

"Say no more. I don't want to know. I just want to provide. As for your sniper friend? What's his weapon of choice? Cannon? Rifle? Pistol?"

Petrea started to cackle. "Kyahahaha! He uses a slingshot!"

"A slingshot...that's pretty creative and unique. Tell me, does he have any caltrops?"

"Tons."

"Smoke bombs?"

"Makes them himself."

"Then what the hell do you need me for?" Lamar raised an eyebrow. "If this guy is as good with any of these things as you are implying, then it's better for him to come across material naturally. Still...does he have any of this?"

He handed a small pellet over to the chocolatier, who examined it in detail. She passed it over to Damian, who did the same. "The hell am I looking at?"

"This is the newest thing on the market. They are calling it 'Wapometal.' Apparently, it came from some toy inventor...it's shape memory alloy. Very new, very revolutionary...in the traditional sense, not like the army. I bet he hasn't seen anything like this yet," the man explained. "I'll sell you two of these and the gun for about 300,000 berries...how's that sound?"

"It sounds like a rip-off of the highest degree!" Damian roared angrily. "For that you are at least going to throw in a pound of those fresh strawberries!"

"And some bananas!" Petrea added. "They taste great with chocolate fondue!"

"And some bananas for fondueing!"

The three of them remained tense for several minutes before they erupted into laughter. "How could I refuse such exquisite haggling skills? Listen, you'd better get going. That auction your friend is going to has already started and I've seen quite a few shady characters walking around today...something big is happening. I can tell."

"So can we," Damian grabbed his arm and gave him a pat on the back. "Lamar, thanks for coming through."

"Anytime. Valentine, it was a pleasure as always."

"Charmed, Mr. Levin. Absolutely charmed. Kyahahaha!"

GWMAPT

"I swear if those two don't get here soon, I will make them feel 'Sadness Blue' for a week," Genevieve gritted through her teeth.

The auction had been going on for some time. There were not too many items left before the two Devil Fruits and she knew that it was going to be a huge event to try to get a bid in. She had no desire nor care to see what happened to the Devil Fruit that was meant for Mr. 4, but she absolutely needed to get the Color-Color Fruit for herself. She had truly been on the fence about eating it or not. She was perfectly content with her own abilities and skills as a painter. Her artwork was an extension of herself and, as such, outside help was not necessary.

But then she met Psycho P, who caused her to rethink that stance.

Here was a person who clearly could not see the potential of such a gift. He could literally turn every sentence he spoke into a rhyme (which Genevieve could not tell was intentional or not) but couldn't find a use for the Color-Color Fruit beyond coloring himself into the background. There was a whole world of color-related themes out there just waiting to be tapped. She literally would not be able to reconcile that fact, knowing that she could have viewed a whole new world and let it be wasted on mere camouflage. Genevieve could literally make the world her palette and that made it worth it. She wasn't going to be like a drunk and require aid to find inspiration; she could use the fruit to propel her ideas into reality.

That is what the greatest painter in the world needed: transcendence.

"What did we miss?" Petrea asked, sliding in next to her after the current item was sold off.

"Somebody took their time..." Genevieve replied with frustration. "You guys are cutting it close."

"This is coming from the painter who is usually lazier than an older

dog," Damian countered. "You've moved faster in the past day than I've seen you do in the past two weeks."

The painter did not acknowledge her remark and tried to keep focus on the auction. "How much do we have left?"

"One hundred and twenty million...that should give you enough here to work with," the bomb-man explained. "We would have more, but we ended up passing the perfect gift for the kid and Connie. Even she had to admit that it was worth the extra berries and time."

Admittedly a bit intrigued, Genevieve looked away from the auction floor and turned to her friends. "Dare I even ask what this 'perfect gift' is?"

"Well..." Petrea began before stiffening up her entire body. "We'll talk later. I think they are ready to bring out the big guns."

THAT got the painter's attention as she snapped her head back at the stage and watched as the auctioneer brought out two small chests. Based on the buzz coming from the crowd, it was clear that this was not as well-kept of a secret as they had anticipated. This is what nearly everyone present had been waiting for.

The Devil Fruits had arrived.

"Folks, we have something special here to end our business today," the auctioneer told the bustling crowd. "We have in our possession two of the rarest items ever to grace these hallowed halls. Not only are these items rare by their very nature, but it's even rarer to know exactly WHAT we are dealing with. My friends, I present you with two Devil Fruits formerly commissioned to be bought by Sir Crocodile himself: the Speed-Speed Fruit and the Color-Color Fruit!"

As the audience gasped, the auctioneer lifted the tops of the two chests. Both Devil Fruits had small name tags denoting which was which, but Genevieve only had eyes for the strawberry-like fruit with swirls and colored spots. That was going to be her prize and she was not going to leave here unless either she or someone who would use its power creatively took it home.

"First up in our auction is the Color-Color Fruit! Straight out of the infamous Devil Fruit Encyclopedia, this fruit grants its users the ability to manipulate colors in any manner of their choosing! Do I hear 500,000?"

"600!" Genevieve shouted, her resolve making her more energetic than she had felt in a long time.

"700!" the voice of Psycho P countered.

"100,000!" Genevieve shot back.

"200,000!" a new voice added.

"250,000!" another person spoke up.

"One million!" Psycho P chimed in again.

"Astounding! We are at one million berries! Do I hear two?" the auctioneer asked the crowd.

"One hundred and ten million!" Genevieve shouted with all her might.

The floor was stunned at the arbitrarily high number that was just shouted. All eyes were on the determined painter, now standing up. There was fire in her eyes and determination in her soul. She would not back down and she would not give in. This was her moment. This was her victory.

"One...one hundred and ten million berries?! Going once...going twice...sold to the little girl!" the auctioneer bellowed to the hall, hitting a gavel down on the podium to signal the auction's end. "You may pay the lady to my right and collect your well-deserved prize!"

Time stopped for Genevieve as she processed exactly what had transpired. She did it. She won the auction. She won the Devil Fruit. She did it. A whole new chapter of her life was about to begin. She did it.

"I did it," she whispered.

"You did it!" her friends began to cheer.

"I DID IT!" Genevieve jumped for joy, ignoring every slothful instinct her body expected from her.

The trio decided to walk up to the woman standing to the right of the auctioneer together. The fruit had been passed along to her while the bidding for the next Devil Fruit began. Genevieve felt a rush of euphoria that rivaled the time her crew traveled up the Knock-Up Stream. It was exhilarating to say the least, but it was worth it.

She had saved the Devil Fruit. It was hers.

"Here you are, young lady," the woman handed her the chest containing the fruit after money was exchanged. "One Devil Fruit. My advice? Take one last dip in the water."

"I'll pass," Genevieve commented absentmindedly. "But thanks for the advice."

Leaving the auction house in triumph, Genevieve could not help but examine her prize. It was not so weird to see a Devil Fruit in person, but it was weird to see one that was *hers*. She had never once considered the possibility of eating a Devil Fruit. But now? She was actually excited to see what this fruit would bring her.

"Excuse me!" an unfamiliar voice called to her. "Excuse me, miss?"

The painter looked around until she found the source of the voice. It was a middle-aged man walking toward her. He had a black top hat on his head and wore a tail coat made of a beautiful plum-colored velvet. His trousers were bottle green and his gloves were pearly grey. Covering his chin, there was a small, neat, pointed black beard...technically a goatee. "Ah, I'm glad I caught you before you ate that fruit."

"You..." Petrea spoke up, her head turning slightly. "Where have I seen you before? Have we met before?"

"I don't believe so, madam," the man bowed slightly. "You see, my name is..."

"THERE THEY ARE! I KNEW THEY WOULDN'T GO FAR!" the angry sounds of Psycho P's voice filled the air.

"Damn it," Damian cursed. "I knew this was going to be a problem."

Before they knew it, the Baroque Works trio was surrounded by several of the Treasure Pirates. Two of their number quickly grabbed Genevieve, holding her in place while the others blocked Damian and Petrea away. Leading them was Psycho P, who was wielding a sword. He pointed it at Genevieve and began to laugh. "Little girl, don't you fret. We've not ended our quarrel yet. You think you can insult me? Think again. Just wait and see..."

"Get off me!" Genevieve struggled.

"What the hell are you blabbing on about?" Damian yelled, adopting an offensive stance. "We won the auction fair and square!"

"Insult my pride is what she did! To get that fruit, I'll kill the kid!"

In a single motion, Psycho P used his sword to swipe the Devil Fruit out of Genevieve's hands. All eyes were on it as it landed directly where the odd gentleman was standing. He picked it up, turned around as if he were deciding to do something, and then returned the fruit back to his feet. "I'll just...I'll just leave this here then..." With that, he scurried out of view, clearly trying to get going while the getting was good. "Good day to you all."

"Wise plan, smart man," Psycho P commented. "Let's get that fruit and return posthaste before Mad Treasure turns us to paste!"

"Where is your boss anyway?" Damian asked, reaching into his pocket and grabbing something. "Couldn't be bothered to be seen with a weakling like you?"

"This is not his fight, but mine. It's Psycho P's time to shine! He's on the ship, it's true; getting ready to sail into the blue."

"You should join him there and quit while you're ahead..." Petrea glared him down. "What we have here is an excellent moment to see if I truly still am as much of a sadist as Damian claimed me to be..."

"And I get to try out my new gun," Damian added menacingly, breathing into every chamber of his cork-gun. "Just to warn you, I'm aiming to wound...but there's a whole lot of pain that comes with it. This is your last chance to just walk away before things happen that you will regret..."

"You dare to mess with the Treasure Pirates? Think again! You're just asking to meet your end!"

"Hey!" Genevieve struggled with her captors. "Less banter; more getting that fruit! I...is that a cork-gun?!"

"Don't kill her; make her watch! She'll die by my hand and by my touch!" Psycho P commanded to the men holding Genevieve.

"That doesn't even rhyme, you idiot!"

Almost instantly, a swarm of pirates rushed at the discarded fruit. Petrea, pulling her parasol out of Connie's bag, jumped high in the air before increasing her weight to get the drop on them before they could grab it. **"10,000 Kilo Press!"**

She landed directly on top of them, crying out in pain as her weight literally started crushing them. Petrea began to laugh before catching herself, silently chastising herself for finding enjoyment in their agony. As this was happening, Damian aimed for the two men holding Genevieve but found himself directly in front of Psycho P's sword.

"Face my sword and you will fall! I've no need for an attack to call!" Psycho P began to slash rapidly at him.

"No! It's too much!" the bomb-man cowered as he backed away. "Crap! We've severely underestimated these..." Damian paused to sneeze directly on his foe. "...excuse me! We've underestimated these guys!"

"What?!" Petrea turned around sharply after getting off of her broken opponents. "You're joking!"

"No! We've completely underestimated these guys' stupidity!" Damian smirked before Psycho P blew up right in front of him.

"Damn, that was awesome."

Unfortunately, Psycho P landed directly where the Devil Fruit was. Seeing this, Petrea bolted to retrieve it as he gained consciousness. Normally, her light weight would work to her advantage, but a large gust of wind managed to hit her and she was blown slightly away from her target. This gave Psycho P just the time to collect himself and grab the fruit.

"NO!" Genevieve finally broke free and ran to stop him with everything she could manage.

"*Shit!*" Damian cursed.

The parka-wearing pirate began to laugh triumphantly. "The gods above must surely shine! This Devil Fruit at last is mine!" He then took a bite out of it and licked his lips. "Not too bad, I must say. I could eat this every day!"

With a single bite, Genevieve watched as her newfound hopes and dreams were shattered. She stopped running and allowed herself to fall to her knees in defeat. It was all for nothing. She wasted the crew's money. She wasted her friends' time. She allowed herself to get worked up about a dream that was destroyed in front of her eyes. There was no other way to describe it:

This was true "Sadness Blue."

The next thing Genevieve knew, she was being shaken by Damian. She wasn't sure how long she was lost in thought, but it was clear that it was not long. Psycho P was on the floor in pain, shot by Damian's explosive gun. This would normally not be a bad thing, but it turned out that they were surrounded. It was to be expected given the extra number of Treasure Pirates Psycho P had brought with him.

What was NOT expected was the fact that they were surrounded by Marines.

Over a dozen Marines had surrounded just the intermediate area. Others, it appeared, had begun to check over the farmer's market

for any illegal contraband. The last were storming the auction house to examine what was being sold. But it was the individuals surrounding Genevieve and Damian that gave the painter worry. The pink hair, the cigarette...this was no mere Marine. This was Captain "Black Cage" Hina. She was well-known throughout the Grand Line as one of the toughest Marine captains out there, no doubt due to the fact she ate the Cage-Cage Fruit (meaning she could use her own body to bind her opponents...namely criminals like the three of them).

"Hina will give you the chance to tell me the substance of this brawl. If nobody saw anything, Hina will arrest everyone on sight!" she was calling to the various pirates she and her men had cornered.

"How long...?" Genevieve whispered weakly as she tried to collect herself.

"About a minute, not a lot," he told her. "Shit, I am so sorry that I..."

"Save it...we've got to get out of here," Genevieve forced herself to not think about what had just happened.

"You think you can take us as your loot? Guess again! I ate the Color-Color Fruit!" Psycho P held out his hands in defiance of Hina, attempting to use his powers. Unfortunately for him, nothing was happening. "How do I do this? This isn't right! Come on powers! I have to fight!"

"Pathetic," Hina sighed. "Boys, tag 'em and bag 'em."

With that, the Marines charged at the Treasure Pirates. The two sides attempted to fight each other on even terms, but it was clear that Hina's men were easily overpowering them. Slowly trying to back away, Damian and Genevieve tried to get up and get out of the ensuing madness. They managed to find a now abandoned empty building to hide away in thanks to the rambunctious nature of the Treasure Pirates with Psycho P leading the charge distracting the Marines, still trying to activate his new abilities. However, there was one thing that they were not counting on.

"HELP!" Petrea's voice cried out.

"PETREA?!" Damian and Genevieve shouted at the same time, trying to peek out of a window without being seen.

Sure enough, Petrea was captured and bound to a nearby column holding up the auction house. Right beside her was Hina herself, guarding the captured former Miss Valentine. As her men continued to try to fight the Treasure Pirates, Hina was more concerned about her prisoner. Damian and Genevieve couldn't make out what she was saying, but it was clear what they had to do.

"So, how do we play this?" Genevieve asked, examining the newly formed battlefield. "The Marines outnumber us, the Treasure Pirates outnumber us, and Petrea has our bag containing my paints."

"Basically, this blows!" Damian bit his lower lip in frustration. "I mucked everything up! She's captured, you don't have your Devil Fruit..."

"I wouldn't go THAT far, good sir," a person standing next to them spoke up, causing the two of them to jump. Sharply turning around, the voice was revealed to come from the gentleman from earlier, also hiding in the same house. "Sorry; I didn't mean to intrude, but it looks like we have similar tastes in hiding spots!"

"What...who..." Damian stammered, utterly confused and overwhelmed. "I don't even know where to BEGIN anymore!"

"As for your second question, my name is Takafumi Liu: confectioner and chocolatier extraordinaire!" he tipped his hat. "Pleased to make your acquaintance!"

The painter and the bomb-man had no words as they regarded the odd man who seemingly appeared out of nowhere. It was Genevieve who decided to speak first, knowing that the time they had before the Marines found them was growing slim and they still needed to think of a battle plan. "As 'nice' as this is, I'm really confused and, honestly, a bit agitated. Our day has gone to hell and we'd really appreciate it if..."

"'Hell,' you say? Appropriate for what I am about to tell you. I'll make this fast since I'd like to avoid any Marine entanglements and I can

see that you want to rescue your friend. You see, I came over to you earlier in the hopes of making a plea to you involving your Devil Fruit, but obviously that fellow in the parka was a bit of a sore loser..."

"What's your point?" Genevieve asked, getting impatient.

"My point is that you are mourning for nothing," Liu explained as he opened his tail coat. Gently, he pulled out something that made Genevieve practically faint on the spot. "I do believe this is yours?"

"Is that...is that...?!" Genevieve kept repeating as she held up an odd strawberry-like fruit.

Damian, clearly pissed off beyond belief, grabbed the man by his collar and raised him up. "I call bullshit on this! We saw that rhyming bastard eat her fruit! That literally JUST happened!"

"Ah, but did you not hear him describe the taste of the fruit?" Liu grinned, maintaining his composure despite his predicament. "Devil Fruits are notoriously foul tasting, are they not? That man did not eat a Devil Fruit. That man has not even touched the Devil Fruit. The only one who did..."

"Was you!" Genevieve completed the thought. "You picked it up off the ground and put it back down...but then what...how...?"

"I'd love to rhyme a riddle or two about the exact 'hows,' but in the past month, my luck has been exceedingly exceptional. I had set out to these parts to find an individual whom I was hoping to convince to find a partnership with despite his ferocious reputation.

Unfortunately for him, he (and I say this after interviewing several dozen individuals) managed to get catapulted into a cyclone and then got eaten by sea kings trying to commandeer another pirate's vessel after surviving such a terrible ordeal...a rather bad end for a former Marine officer turned pirate, wouldn't you say?"

"I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about but it sounds too damn confusing for my liking," Damian told him, still getting increasingly worried about his partner. "Could we wrap this up and knock it off with the vague and pointless backstory?!"

"Wait...you said this was a former Marine who was a pirate...that got catapulted into a cyclone?" Genevieve asked, her eyes going from the fruit to him. "His name wouldn't happen to have been Gasparde, would it?"

"YOU'RE FOLLOWING THIS?!" Damian fumed, trying to keep his voice down with all his might. "HOW THE HELL DO YOU KNOW THIS?!"

"That'd be him! How did you know him?" Liu asked before a pirate was thrown right beside him. He looked down and used his feet to move him back out the door and into the conflict happening mere feet away from their hiding spot. "Goodness! Off you go! Back to the brawl with you!"

"We ended up racing against him right after we got back from Beach City but right before we hit Jaya...Luffy hit him into the cyclone after drenching himself in flour...because he ate the Candy-Candy Fruit!" Genevieve's eyes widened with realization. "Does that mean...?!"

"I believe that the victory lies in the preparation. I researched the exact fruit that the Candy-Candy Fruit could reincarnate into if its owner were to pass on. As I held the nearest buscarinon orange to where he met his end, I was now the proud owner of the Candy-Candy Fruit. I'm a candy-man!" Liu demonstrated this by creating a perfect facsimile of the Color-Color Fruit from his hand using a green liquid.

"Holy shit!" Damian and Genevieve uttered in unison.

"But why? Why help me? Why did you come here?" Genevieve asked, eyeing the fruit in her hand with awe.

"Since we are pressed for time, I'll be utterly brief! I'm here after hearing about the auction and how there as a chance that Devil Fruits were going to be put up for bidding. You see, I'm experimenting with a new kind of candy that replicates the powers of a Devil Fruit user for the purposes of parlor tricks...nothing combative or permanent after a few uses. I don't know if it will work, but this might be my big chance to take the next step from being a big name in Paradise and establish a foothold in the New World,

maybe even securing a patronage from the Minister of Candy himself!" Liu practically squealed in delight. "That is my passion, the same passion I could hear from you as you bid on that fruit. I came to you before, as I do now, to ask if I could keep the remains of your fruit for experimentation. Since I no doubt missed the individual who ate the other fruit, you are my only hope."

The painter started to tear up, nodding like crazy. She held the fruit up, sniffed it, and took a bite. At once, she began to gag and practically threw up. Describing the taste of it was nearly impossible. All she could say is that her taste buds were permanently scarred.

But then it hit her.

In an instant, she could see it all. The colors of everything around her were no longer just there to view...they were there to touch and to play with. They were there for her to study and examine. They were there to admire and dream about.

Then her mind began to race. She quickly began to realize just how limited she was involving her worldview with colors. Why would the color blue only be relegated to mere sadness? Blue was the color of trust and responsibility! Yellow might make one laugh, but it could also make one happy or even cowardly! Her Color Traps were barely scratching the surface of what a color hypnotist could do.

This was the new world of possibilities Genevieve had been hoping for. It did not disappoint.

"Genevieve?" Damian asked her name. "How...how do you feel?"

"In a word? Fulfilled," Genevieve allowed herself to blush with joy. As she did so, she felt something on her cheek. "What the...?"

"Did your rosy cheeks just turn orange?!" Damian pointed to her face.

Patting them, Genevieve brought her hand back and saw the color orange on her fingertips. She flicked her hand slightly, causing the color to hit the nearby wall and leave an orange, circular mark. Almost instantly, Genevieve began to put the pieces together. "I'll

never need another palette for battle again! This is...this is perfect!" She then gave the candy-man the rest of the fruit and then a giant hug. "You...I can't even begin to describe my thanks..."

"Then don't. Go and save your friend," Liu patted her head and tucked away his prize. "I'll use the presumable ensuing chaos to my advantage and escape with my clean record intact!"

"We can handle that," the painter grinned, beginning to think of different colors that she could use to her advantage. As she did so, her cheeks began to change color based on thought process. "Damian, let me handle them. You focus on shooting down Petrea from the wall!"

"Easier done than said!" Damian laughed as he cocked his gun. "Thanks for looking out for us, candy-man! It's big, damn hero time!"

As the two left the house to join the fray, Damian couldn't help but ask one question. "Why the hell was this the first time I am hearing about Luffy punching a dude into a cyclone?"

"We were supposed to win a lot of money and didn't. After that happened, Nami nearly had a mental breakdown and forced us never to speak of it again on penalty of owing her money..."

"Say no more. That woman scares me more than Crocodile did," Damian shuddered. "How do you want to play this?"

"The Steven-way," the girl smiled. "I can think of no better way to try out my new range..."

"Whatever. Take the lead, 'Goldenweek!'" the bomb-man grinned.

The painter returned it happily. "Let's get Petrea back, 'Five.'"

The area outside of the auction house was in complete disarray. The Marines were easily overpowering the Treasure Pirates and Captain Hina had finally joined the battle to start binding the fallen pirates to keep in the brig for later transport to Impel Down. The appearance of a younger opponent took the Marines slightly off-guard before Hina pulled out a small card and examined it. "Hina knows you. You're from Baroque Works, are you not?"

"I defected..." Genevieve waved her hand. "Are you going to hold that against me?"

"You...Smoker was talking about you three...but Hina was under the impression that most of you retired away..." the Marine captain took a drag on her cigarette. "Why are you here?"

"'Retired?' No, that'd be them. Me? I'm a Straw Hat proud and true," the girl bowed theatrically.

Merely mentioning the words "Straw Hats" was enough for the Marines to surround her, hostility clearly forming in the air. Hina, moving away from the Treasure Pirates she was attacking, began to make her way toward Genevieve. However, Genevieve moved faster than anyone was expecting. Her cheeks had switched from its natural rosy color to a shade of deep blue. She touched her hands to her cheeks and twirled them in the air, creating a giant Color Trap symbol all around them. **"Color Trap: Musical Deep Blue!"**

Hina braced herself for some kind of physical impact, but merely found that the ground she was standing on was painted blue. Shrugging it off, Hina tried to move again. "Is this your idea of trying to rumble? Pathetic, it is you who will take a *tumble*!" She stopped immediately and dropped her cigarette.

"Did the captain just sing that?" Fullbody asked, both shocked and intrigued.

"Of course, Hina did *not*...wait! Hina *did*! *She's sounding shrill against her will and cannot stop this singing!*"

"*And in my ears I swear I hear a quite distinctive ringing!*" Jango sang happily.

"*This silly game is very lame and someone's going to pay!*" Psycho P wailed from the ground.

"*An unknown force and there's the source who has us in its sway!*" Fullbody pointed to the blue markings on the ground.

"*It is doing this to us! We have got to stop this crap! This dastardly, despicable, disturbingly inexplicable...*" Jango and Fullbody sang

together with great joy.

"*You're imminently kickable*," Hina groaned, acknowledging her two cadets with derision and fury.

"*We are seemingly trapped in...*" everyone who had the ability to threw up their hands in unison.

Thankfully, this was just the opportunity Damian needed to shoot the pillar Petrea (who was watching this in complete and utter shock) was strapped in. "**CORK-GUN BOMBING!**" As the pillar exploded into several tiny little pieces, Genevieve and Damian ran into the Color Trap to retrieve her before she fell to the ground (also allowing a certain candy-man the perfect cover to escape). The resulting shot managed to cause Petrea's bindings to break, meaning she could move freely again. If she landed in the Color Trap, she would fall under Genevieve's sway as well, thus required her friends' help since there was no floor to springboard off if she changed her weight and no way to grab her parasol in time. Unfortunately, this meant that she had to watch Genevieve and Damian dance toward their her.

"*The Color Trap!*" Genevieve sang out as she quickly moved, simultaneously looking embarrassed and confident. "*Put down your arms my friends, or you will learn to dread. Any attack will end up over there. **Color Trap: Bullfight Red!***"

Doing a dance reminiscent of Mr. 2's ballet, Genevieve twirled herself and created a new Color Trap symbol at the wall of the auction house while Damian grabbed Petrea. Hina, not wasting any time and realizing that she could move if she danced to the nonexistent music that they were singing to, threw her arms out at the now-reunited trio. "*You think Hina's happy? Feel her growing rage! It's time now to face the **KIMONO SLEEVE CAGE!***"

Her arms quickly turned into two identical cages protruding out at the trio. Unfortunately for her, she was compelled to shift where her attack landed, surrounding the Marines closest to the auction house instead, giving Genevieve and the "Mr. 5 Pair" just the opening they were looking for to leave.

"And now that Hina's been delayed, our presence here should pass! A distraction is what we need so kick in tune at last!" Genevieve commanded as she and Damian held Petrea over their heads in a pyramid-like pose. The chocolatier, who was not affected by the Color Trap as she had not actually touched the ground, quickly grabbed onto the hands, changed their weights and then her own, and jumped off of them, doing everything in her power to hold onto them.

The wind was still picking up, so it was not a clear landing away from the action. However, wherever they landed was a place away from Genevieve's Color Trap, meaning they could move freely once again. The same could not be said for Captain Hina, who was still stuck attacking the same spot in utter frustration while her crew danced around her.

"This day could not get any worse even if it tried. Remember that bar Hina promised?" she sang in fury, frustrated beyond all belief at how her shore leave was going and at the embarrassing scenario that played out before her eyes.

"Yeah?" Jango and Fullbody responded hopefully.

"HINA LIED!"

GWMAPT

"...so you're telling me that not only did you eat your Devil Fruit after all, not ONLY did you just free me by causing the hardened Black Cage Corps to DANCE and SING in a way that would make the Universes proud, but you met THE Takafumi Liu?!" Petrea asked incredulously as the trio ran as fast as they could for the sea train station. *"As in the greatest chocolatier this side of the Sabaody Archipelago?!"*

"Is...is he a big deal or something?" Damian huffed and puffed as he ran, slowly losing energy. "I'm dying here!"

"Allow me. **Color Trap: Energy Boost Red!**" Tapping her finger to her cheeks again, she hit Damian with a bit of red paint and watched as he immediately picked up speed, much to his own surprise.

"WOO-HOO! I FEEL LIKE A BILLION BERRIES!"

"Shut up, you idiot! If they hear your yelling, we'll never get off this island!" Petrea scolded him as she and the painter attempted to keep up with the now-sprinting man. "And for the record, Liu is definitely a big deal! Now I know where I've seen him! He used to write articles in some cooking magazines I subscribed to! He's known for his crazy and outlandish delicacies! He's brilliant and...you know what? He's our world's closest non-Totto Land equivalent to Willy Wonka. Does THAT spell it out for you?!"

"ACTUALLY, YEAH! YEAH, IT DOES!" Damian shouted back, widening the gap between them as he did so.

"At this rate, we'll never catch up to him...unless..." Genevieve thought aloud, her body starting to fail her from overexerting herself more in the past few hours than she had in the past few weeks. "Petrea, carry me!"

"What?!"

"Use your powers and make me light! While you're doing that, I'm going to hit you with the Color Trap and you'll be catching up to him in no time!"

The blonde nodded and grabbed her with one hand. "Hold on tight! You're only a single kilogram and we are about to move incredibly fast. With this wind picking up, there's a high chance you'll be blown away!"

"Less statistics, more running!" Genevieve hit her with the red paint, causing the chocolatier to run into overdrive.

"KYAHAAAAHA! WOAHH NELLY! NOW I KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN!" Petrea cackled with glee as she burst forward as fast as she could. "THIS IS AMAZING!"

GWMAPT

"This...this sucks!" Petrea and Damian groaned in agony once they reached the Pucci station. As a side effect of pushing their bodies to an unnatural limit, the two began to feel every ounce of pain that

comes with running that fast without proper preparation or a warm-up as soon as Genevieve removed their marks with her powers.

For her part, Genevieve was doing her best to drag them to the sea train. "Come on! Work with me a bit here! If I blast you guys again, you'll never wake up! We just need to get on that train!"

Thankfully for them, the sea train was already there and waiting for them. It was fortuitous that it had not left yet, although it was odd that there was not a large crowd of passengers waiting to board...unless...

"Oh no. The train is about to leave!" Genevieve panicked. "Okay... okay..." **Color Trap: Friendship Yellow-Green!**"

Using her new abilities once more, she affixed the symbol of the Color Trap onto their clothing, causing their bodies to loosen up and become somewhat docile. "Listen, this is the best I could do without overkilling your bodies. I'll make it up to you later! Could you guys please just ignore the pain for a few more moments and get on the sea train? The ticket was good for any round trip, so we'll just get the tickets out on the train!"

"Sure thing, friend!" Petrea and Damian smiled in unison. They both got on and made their way to the train, their faces clearly wincing in pain as they took every step. As they did so, they walked past the ticket man, who ran up to stop them from boarding.

"Hey! You can't get on this train! It's reserved for..." he started before Genevieve shot him with the same Color Trap that was affixed to her companions. "...true friends like you! Head on in, but I should warn you about the other passengers..."

"Save it, 'friend.' Thanks for your help!" Genevieve called as she entered the car. "I can't believe that just worked! I can't believe we are in the clear! I can't...oh, phooey."

Genevieve looked around the train car to see it full of uniformed Marines, all utterly confused as to why three complete strangers were on the train with them. "Uh...hi?" Genevieve waved. "If this car is yours, we'll find another..."

"This train is reserved for the World Government, young lady," a man resembling a zombie told her, standing up and walking over to her. "I do not know why you are aboard this train, but I must politely ask you to leave."

"I...I understand, sir," she bowed, pretending to be afraid and lost. "Th-The nice man just said this was the last train to Water Seven tonight!"

"And it is," he bent down and smiled a frightening, yet genuine, smile. "Unfortunately, we have a job we have to do. If this were any other time, we'd be happy to let you ride with us...but orders are orders!"

"Oh. I get it," Genevieve bowed again, putting her hands to her yellow-green cheeks. "I guess we'll be going." She moved her hands quickly away from her face in a swift motion, the colors stuck to her fingers being flung directly at the man's shirt. He stood there for a moment, frozen in place, before beginning to blink again. "I'm sorry for the mix-up. Come on, Petrea...Damian. Let's..."

"On second thought..." the Marine interjected in an enthusiastic voice. "Why don't you join us after all?"

"CAPTAIN T-BONE?!" the Marines shouted in unison.

"I see nothing wrong with it, do any of you? If they just want to join us for our ride, I see no problem with it. That, men, is what makes us decent Marines!" T-Bone cheered, his hands outstretched with pride. "Now, if you all could lift up your shirts?"

"WHAT?!"

"That is an order, gentlemen!"

Slowly, the Marines each lifted up their uniforms to reveal their bare skin underneath. They were all incredibly confused, but complied with the request regardless of their misgiving. "Uh...sir? What's that on your uniform?" somebody spoke up, pointing to the symbol of the Color Trap. "That wasn't there a moment ago."

"Oh, this? It was given to me by a friend..." T-Bone pointed to

Genevieve. "In fact, I believe she'd love to share it with you!"

"WHAT?!"

In an instant and with precise accuracy, Genevieve managed to hit every Marine officer in a single strike using a smaller variation of the attack she used in Alabasta to hit the entire crowd. With that, the entire car was now under her hypnotic control of "Friendship Yellow-Green." She then counted the Marines and frowned. "Boys, I'd love it if you all returned to proper uniforms...and to not tell another soul about it or that we are stowing away."

"YES, MISS FRIEND!"

While they were making themselves far more presentable, Genevieve began to pace and think. "There's obviously a reason WHY this train is reserved...and clearly this symbol is going to be a dead giveaway that something is amiss...Captain T-Bone?"

"Yes, friend?"

"First off, where exactly is this train headed?"

"Merely to Enies Lobby to transport a major criminal. I was not made aware of the details, only that my presence was requested," T-Bone explained to his new "friend." "I should point out that we will also be picking up additional personnel at the next stop...I believe a member of CP6 and CP7 has been assigned to this detail as well..."

"Good to know. We just need to keep cover until we hit Water Seven and meet up with the others. Could you open your shirt, allow me to put that nice symbol on your chest, and then keep it our secret?"

"Of course!"

As he unbuttoned his jacket, Genevieve walked over to Petrea and Damian, who were smiling and sitting down without a care in the world. The painter tapped the symbols affixed to their clothing and watched as the colors returned to her fingers before disappearing all together. When that happened, the two practically collapsed due to sheer exhaustion.

"HOLY CRAP! Y-Y-YOU COULD HAVE KILLED US!" Damian panted dramatically. "WARN US NEXT TIME!"

"I did warn you!" Genevieve rubbed her temples in frustration. "Look, we need uniforms to fit in here. I...all finished, captain?"

"Indeed, I am! Do what you must!" T-Bone closed his eyes as he waited for his chest to be painted. Genevieve happily obliged and affixed the symbol in a spot where it would not be noticed. After that, she removed the symbol from the outside of the jacket, completing the ruse.

"You...you were able to use your...your Color Traps on two Marine captains?!" Petrea panted, still trying to catch your breath. "I thought it only worked on the weak-minded!"

"It could work on people with stronger minds, but not for long. Now? Now I have a wider range of these abilities. I'm sure there will be more that I will figure out as I experiment, but we'll stick with this for now," Genevieve explained. "Captain, do you have any Marines here who are our sizes?"

The friendly Marine glances over the exhausted "Mr. 5 Pair" and Genevieve before snapping his fingers. "Cadets Howard and Morris should have uniforms that would fit our friends, but nobody here is as petite as you are."

"I figured that. Um, this is directed at the cadets he just named. Do you happen to have a spare uniform with you?"

"NO, MISS FRIEND!" they shouted.

"I see...whelp. Please remove your uniforms and pass them to these two here. You may leave the train and enjoy some well-deserved shore leave. Is that fine with you, Captain T-Bone?"

"Anything you say, friend of mine! You heard her, cadets! For your troubles today, you may elect to stay in Pucci until we return!" T-Bone ordered.

"SIR! YES, SIR!"

"And don't talk to that cage-lady while you are there..." Genevieve added.

"And you will refrain from contacting Captain Hina! This is meant to be a relaxing time for you both!"

"SIR! YES, SIR!"

The two left the train just in time for it to depart from the station. Both Petrea and Damian were now officially outfitted in Marine uniforms, easily hidden among the crowd. As such, it was time for Genevieve to address the troops. "Men, we are all friends here, right?"

"YES, MISS FRIEND!"

"And friends do things for other friends?"

"YES, MISS FRIEND!"

"Well, as your friend, I ask you to ignore our presence as we make it to our destination unless it is essential to our survival. If I ask you to do something, pretend that it was Captain T-Bone's idea. Once we are off the train, the Color Trap should dissolve and this will all just be a faded memory. Does everybody understand?"

"YES, MISS FRIEND!"

Feeling confident in her work, Genevieve allowed herself to slump down in a chair. She cracked her neck and yawned. "This is it. We are in the clear. Now all we have to do is make it to Water Seven and we'll be home free!" She acknowledged her two true friends, who were now weakly adjusting their uniforms. "You guys should nap until we make it to the next stop. You used a lot of energy."

"N-No thanks to you," Petrea grumbled.

As Genevieve drifted off to sleep, the last thing she heard was Damian's voice. "Re-Remind me not to piss her off or get her energized again."

GWMAPT

Before Genevieve knew it, she was being nudged by Captain T-Bone. The sight of him was frightening enough, but she was slightly worried that the effects of the Color Trap had already worn off. She gulped and prepared herself for the worst. "H-Hello, Captain T-Bone! I-I-Is something the matter?"

"I just wished to inform you that were are about to dock at St. Poplar. I highly recommend that you find a place to hide, since you will be arrested and captured upon discovery," he informed her, her Color Trap clearly still affecting him.

The painter gazed over to Petrea and Damian, who were also apparently woken up and were attempting to keep a professional face going to blend in with the other members of T-Bone's unit, and realized the issue with her situation. "Ah...I...don't even know where to hide?"

The Marine thought about it for a moment before snapping his fingers. "Madam, may I suggest up here?" He opened up the luggage compartment above the seats. "I know it is a tight squeeze, but it is the only place that will not be examined in this train car, given our instructions to do so upon arrival. As your friend, I do believe it is your best chance to make it to Water Seven undetected."

"Why don't you try that camouflage technique the parka-guy was so insistent upon?" Damian called to her.

"Because I've never tried it before...and I don't know how good of a camouflage illusion it makes..." The painter groaned at the prospect of staying hidden in a small space for another few hours, but she quickly realized she had no choice in the matter. As such, she grabbed Connie's bag from Petrea and motioned for T-Bone to lift her up into the small space. As this was happening, she spied Damian and Petrea laughing to themselves, causing Genevieve to narrow her eyes in anger. "The next one of you who chuckles gets 'Laughter Yellow' on them when we get back to the Merry."

Upon being closed in, she now attempted to maintain being awake for the remainder of the journey. She did not truly know how long her Color Traps would last if she was not looking at them, but the fear

that came with her falling asleep before was fresh in her mind. She listened and waited as people walked through the car to enter other cars, chatting with Captain T-Bone and preparing him for the upcoming assignment. She couldn't make out exactly what was being said, but they still did not reveal who the prisoner was that they were transporting.

Time went on and the plan was seemingly still going off without a hitch. As she started to sweat, the painter began to fear that any sweat that hit her cheek would cause the Color Trap to wear off, but that proved not to be the case. Still, she assumed that it **WOULD** wear off if it was the victim who was sweating, meaning that Hina and the other Marines were **DEFINITELY** no longer dancing. This led her to examine her newfound powers on an introspective level. She mused and thought of ideas for her new abilities, deciding that her musical idea would be perfect to use in collaboration with Greg's powers if she ever decided to use that move again. Other thoughts came to her mind that she could not wait to try. It was overwhelming to feel so motivated and excited after years of coasting by, but she had grown used to it in the past few months. This was a good thing and she was happy to be growing into a better person and painter.

Losing the ability to swim was a small price to pay for her newfound abilities. Nothing would be able to ruin her mood short of being discovered by the Marines.

However, things changed as the sea train docked at (what Genevieve assumed to be) Water Seven. As with before, more people entered the train and passed by, meaning that it was slowly getting ready to the point where Genevieve would leave the small compartment at last. In no time at all, a knock was placed on her hiding spot and it was opened. The light was temporarily blinding, but when her eyes adjusted, Petrea and Damian were right there, looking worried beyond belief.

"Are...are we at Water Seven?" she asked weakly.

"We are...but there's a problem..." Petrea explained, her face paler than T-Bone's.

Over the course of minutes, Petrea quickly explained that an

unconscious Steven was brought into the car by a weasel-looking man and an ape in a train conductor outfit. It was clear that either Steven was the mystery prisoner that was being talked about or he was captured along the way. As such, this changed everything that Genevieve and the others had planned up until this point.

"Okay...okay..." Genevieve began to panic, trying to keep her voice down before she ended up getting caught and ruining their chances of freeing Steven and making it back to the Merry. "We need to separate Steven from those other people...do you guys have any ideas?!"

"I'm thinking! I'm thinking!" Damian hissed, pacing back and forth. "What the hell, man?! What the hell did we even walk into?!"

"Let's focus here...this is Steven. Steven will try to talk his way out of everything...Steven will...will sing," Petrea's eyes widened in realization. "I've got it! Tell Captain T-Bone to listen carefully for Steven to sing. If he does, have him ask the others if he could perform for us. If we can get him in this car, we can use your abilities to brainwash his captors and get the hell off this train with Steven in-tow!"

The painter thought about it and began to nod. "Petrea, you're a genius. Really, you are. Captain T-Bone, I have a favor to ask of you..."

As Genevieve explained the plan, she went back into her hiding spot and waited. Sure enough, she eventually heard Steven sing and learned rather quickly that he was not the main objective of the World Government. Rather, it was Nico Robin, which made a lot more sense given her history with Baroque Works and whatever Captain Smoker was talking about regarding Ohara. She also learned that the people behind this were not just any members of the World Government, but the legendary CP9, who were never truly confirmed to exist.

In a miraculous turn of events, Captain T-Bone had managed to get Steven separated entirely from CP9. He was now crying directly below where she was hiding, causing her heart to break. However, if everything was going right, Steven would be flanked by two special

guards who would turn those tears into a smile...

The Feroicity of the Aqua Laguna

"...and that's how we got here!" Petrea finished explaining their journey to Steven as quickly as possible.

The boy, still bound and unable to do anything about it, sat there flabbergasted. Of all the ways for this day to go, this was the absolute last direction he could have predicted. In the span of twenty-four hours, practically everything had been turned on its head. His crew was divided, the ship was unrepairable, he quit the Crystal Gems, his date with Connie was tarnished, he was captured by government assassins, and was now in the presence of the LAST people he could have pictured seeing. Finally, something GOOD was happening to him.

"I can't even...you...I mean...YOU ATE A DEVIL FRUIT?!" Steven gasped upward, whispering as loud as he could.

"For the fifth time, yes!" the muffled voice of Genevieve called to him from her hiding spot. "I know it's a lot to take in, but we kind of are in the dark here..."

"Literally in her case," Damian interjected.

There was silence for a moment while Genevieve clearly muttered something that Steven couldn't make out before she spoke up once more. "...I hate you. Regardless, we are kind of lost as to why you are here and what we have walked into. Care to fill in some of the gaps for us?"

"How do I put this delicately?" Steven began, not knowing how much time he had before his captors returned. "Um...so the Going Merry can't be fixed no matter what we do..."

"What," the trio responded in unison.

"...Usopp quit the crew..."

"What?"

"...he fought Luffy in a duel and lost..."

"What?!"

"...and I quit the Crystal Gems and ran away before all of, well, this."

"*What?!*"

"Back the hell up!" Damian practically fell on his face in utter shock and horror. "You're telling me that ALL of this happened in a DAY?! What the ever-loving hell?!"

"The Merry can't be fixed?" Petrea's eyes widened. "You QUIT the Gems?! I just...why?!"

"I just got so mad at Garnet and Pearl," Steven sullenly replied, tears forming in his eyes. "Garnet saw that the fight would happen and Pearl...Pearl just isn't happy no matter what I do to help! I couldn't stand it anymore...but now I feel so terrible about it!"

"Aw, kid..." Damian awkwardly patted Steven's back to try to comfort him. "I'm sorry that you've had to deal with this crap. It sounds like you've had a day from hell..."

The youth sniffled a bit, unable to really wipe away his tears since he was bound. "I mean...it wasn't all bad...I took Connie on a date...and I kissed her."

A high pitched squeal came from the luggage compartment as Genevieve pushed the door open enough to look directly at Steven. The half-Gem noticed immediately that her rosy cheeks had almost doubled in size somehow. "You *kissed* Connie! Ahhhhh!"

"I thought that we were trying to be stealthy here!" Damian hissed at her. "Get back in there!"

"But...but...this is important!" Genevieve whined as she shut the door again.

"If we get our asses caught right now, then it won't matter what he did! We need to be smart about this!" Damian snapped at her. "I know we've been out of the game for a bit, but we need to think! We

are on a train surrounded by government agents and assassins! There are only four of us and these Marines that are still under the delusion that we are friends right now! How the hell do we get out of this before they stop chewing each other out?"

"If I may interrupt, my friends?" Captain T-Bone suddenly spoke up, causing everyone to jump. "If you are going to attempt anything, you should do so now. You are about to lose the element of surprise and once this train leaves, it will be impossible for you to make it out of here alive unless you are willing to see the train all the way to Enies Lobby."

The two visible former Baroque Works Agents stared at the Marine captain in blank surprise. It was becoming more and more apparent that they were clearly not ready for a rescue of this magnitude in this amount of time. Steven, whose hope of escaping had somewhat diminished, just gave his friends a meaningful smile. "It's okay, guys. If I have to do this, at least I know you guys are here to have my back. Maybe we can be there for Robin too."

"Aw crap, I forgot about her...how the hell are we going to pull this off?!" Damian grabbed his head in frustration and stood up, walking to the door separating the train cars. "After all we went through to get here, we are going to end up watching as our friends end up being sent to Impel Down or wherever the hell they are going to take you both!"

"Keep it together, Damian!" Petrea told him bluntly. "We are not giving up!"

"Damn straight, we aren't! I just don't know...aw shit! They are coming back!" the bomb-man stopped as he listened in. "Steven, listen to me: you CAN'T make it seem like you know we are here! Don't playact or anything like that. Pretend like you don't know that we are here or that our near-dead ace in the hole is hypnotized to be our friend! These guys can pick up on that kind of stuff easily!"

Steven nodded profusely, his eyes darting from them to the door. "Got it! What are you going to do? Get out of here and get help?"

"We might not have a plan, but we sure as shit are not about to let

you do this alone. Let us figure out how we are going to rescue you, kid. Until then, just remember that it's gonna be okay," Damian adjusted his uniform and lowered his sunglasses, giving him a wink.

"Besides, do you honestly think the others aren't planning on storming this train and saving you as we speak?" Petrea reassured him, also preparing her disguise. "They toppled a criminal empire to save a country. These guys don't stand a chance if they took one of their own. Between us and them, we'll be back to the Merr...um...back together in no time!" the chocolatier hastily coughed, trying to hide the fact that she brought up the dying ship.

Before Steven could get another word in, Apollo and Nero returned to the car. They were silent and sullen, clearly the result of the conversation they shared with Lucci and the other members of CP9. Nodding to Captain T-Bone, they helped Steven to his feet and led him back to their own car. The half-Gem looked back once to see his friends off before he was once again confined to captivity, but they did not dare to return it. The second the three of them left, Damian and Petrea began to sweat.

"Just to be clear, we have no idea how we are going to pull this off, right?" Damian asked his former partner.

"None whatsoever," Petrea replied, fear oozing in her voice. "I'm utterly petrified. I have faith that Robin can handle getting out of here herself, but Steven? He's not ready for something like this! They'll kill him first! What the hell are we going to do?!"

It was then that the sea train began to jump to life. Looking out of the window, they watched as the train departed from the Water Seven station towards Enies Lobby. Any chance of them getting off of the train was now seemingly thrown out of the window. In its place was the fear and dread of fighting off the might of the World Government itself.

"We pray for a miracle," Genevieve told them from her hiding spot, her voice unsteady and fearful.

GWMAPT

In Water Seven, the station for the sea train was practically empty. The main inhabitants were two groggy train conductors who had just been knocked out by a mysterious man. However, they would not be alone, for a large group of people were making their way toward them. Led by a reindeer and an elderly woman, they were running as fast as they could. But there was nothing they could do:

They missed the Puffing Tom.

"IT'S GONE?!" Greg Universe wailed as he collapsed to the floor in agony. "THE TRAIN LEFT?!"

"Steven..." Nami whispered with shock. "He's really been kidnapped?"

"This is my fault! I should have known something was up with that gorilla!" Connie kicked the ground in frustration, tears streaming down her face. "I should have done something! I should have..."

"Kid, you can't blame yourself. If your boy has been kidnapped by the government, then they are playing a long game. Trust me: the government is full of terrible people with secrets that they want buried," Kokoro explained to the grieving girl. "Any thoughts on why they'd want your friend?"

Connie wiped away the tears from her eyes. "Outside of the fact he's a half-alien from another dimension with a bounty? Not at all!"

"That...that's about three thoughts right there! Ngagagaga! You crazy pirates amaze me more and more!"

"Is this really a laughing matter?!" Amethyst angrily stepped in front of the elderly train conductor. "Steven is kidnapped and we are just standing here! If we can't get him by train, we'll get him back by air!"

"Guys?" Chopper tried to interject as he sniffed the air.

"Girlie, I don't think you understand just what an Aqua Laguna is capable of!"

"Guys?" Chopper tried again.

"And I think you don't understand what a Crystal Gem is capable of!"

"GUYS!" Chopper shouted, causing Amethyst to back off of Kokoro and to acknowledge him. "I can't guarantee it, but I think Steven was here!"

"Who? Steven?" Amethyst asked sharply. "He was on the train?"

"I think so...it's hard to tell for sure. I really can't smell with all of this wind, but I swear I thought I caught a faint trace of him and...is that...Robi...GAH!"

At that moment, the already-strong waves began to rise higher and higher, crashing into the train station. Thinking quickly, Amethyst used her whips to grab the crew, Kokoro, Chimney, Gonbe, and the barely-conscious train conductors away from harm. The strength of the wave was enough to literally strip away the stone foundation into the sea.

"Amethyst! You saved us!" Nami gasped, her outfit now drenched in water. "Thank you!"

"No prob, Bob," Amethyst shrugged it off, but kept her focus out into the sea. "That would have swallowed you guys whole if I was even a second off..."

"DID YOU SEE THE SIZE OF THAT WAVE?!" Greg began to panic. "IS THAT NORMAL HERE?!"

"Not at all," Kokoro shook her head, her expression grave. "This is far more intense than any Aqua Laguna I can recall...this is bad. Very bad."

"Steven..." Connie gasped, catching the implications of her expression.

"Nah; the train will be fine so long as they don't get a direct hit. They left at the perfect time to avoid high tide and the tracks run just outside of where the storm is really raging," Kokoro clarified herself. "But Water Seven is going to take a serious beating this year..."

"What does that mean?" Connie asked.

"It means just that. The city is used to getting a thrashing from the Aqua Laguna, don't get me wrong. It strikes and then the city rebuilds itself. That's what happens when your island is literally sinking into the ocean. But this? This is going to be the strongest Aqua Laguna Water Seven has seen in years."

"So our odds of navigating this on a boat would be..." Nami asked, her face falling.

"Slim to none," Kokoro nodded.

As the waves crashed and roared around them, the pirates considered their situation. It seemed like there was no safe way to go after Steven, who they still had no definitive proof was on the train outside of Chopper's hunch. Greg, staring out at the ocean, clenched his fist and took a giant breath. "I'm going to ask around for a ship."

"WHAT?!" everybody yelled at once, taken back by the musician's declaration.

"Is that a good idea, granny?" Chimney asked Kokoro, whose jaw dropped.

"Greg, did you not just hear her?! She said that there is no chance us of navigating this weather!" Amethyst ran to him.

"She said our chances were 'slim to none,'" Greg clarified, clearly shaking in fear but trying to ignore it. "That means that there is still a chance...a minuscule chance that will probably kill us...but a chance nevertheless!"

Kokoro, looking more serious than she ever had before, grabbed the man by his shirt and shook him. "Only a complete idiot would take that chance! Look at those waves! Every time they pull out, more of the ocean goes with it! If it keeps that up, you'll be dragged below the surface!"

"Don't you think I know that?! Don't you think I'm terrified?! My son is out there and he's alone and probably terrified! It's my job as a parent to be there for him!"

"And it's your job as a parent to be alive to take care of him!" Kokoro countered him. "If you take a boat out, you'll die!"

"I..." Greg looked at his hands and brought them to his face, fully sobbing at this point. "I just want my boy back with me! It's one thing when it's a Gem mission, but this? He needs me!"

"Miss Kokoro is right, Greg! I know weather enough to tell when it isn't safe to travel...I don't want to accept it, but it's true! We have to find another way!"

"But what other choice do we have, Nami?! If the only think that will survive this storm is a train and that's the only train here, then we are out of options!"

"I could try to shapeshift into a train..." Amethyst thought aloud, her eyes darting to the tracks, which were being brought closer to the shore with another mighty wave.

"HEY!" a person wearing a Galley-La shirt called out from above where they were huddled. "Did I just hear that there is somebody named 'Nami' around here?"

The group stopped their argument and acknowledged the man, who was flanked by more members of Galley-La. While they were clearly still focused on the matter of the kidnapped half-Gem, the sheer randomness of an unknown party searching for Nami of all people warranted their full attention. "Uh...that's me?" Nami looked up in confusion. "What's is to you?"

"Somebody left you a letter and a Den Den Mushi up here in front of the station," the man called down, waving a small piece of paper and the tiny snail phone in the air. "I think they are a member of your crew..."

"My crew? Wait...you aren't trying to kill us?" Nami hesitated before leaving her position.

The man's face burned red. "We...we are sorry about all of that. Your friend, the green one, she saved the mayor, so we are repaying the favor by trying to help you all out. Your other friends

are with Paulie right now searching for you too. We know you guys didn't have anything to do with Iceburg now..."

"Peri saved that guy with the mouse?!" Amethyst's face lit up. "Dude! No way!"

"That's good, right?" Connie sniffled. "Maybe this is the break we needed?"

"Maybe," Nami allowed herself a smile as they all congregated toward the shipwright. "I'm amazed you found a letter that small in weather like this and...and why am I not surprised?"

Upon reaching the same level as him, it was clear just why he was able to find a small note: the mysterious member of the crew whose identity was still a complete mystery had written a giant sign over the entire wall. It read, quite fittingly, "NAMI! READ THIS! IF YOU AREN'T NAMI, DON'T READ THIS, IDIOT!"

"Words fail me," Greg couldn't help but laugh for a moment despite the tears still streaming down his face.

"How did he manage to draw hearts up that high?" Amethyst asked, staring high up the architecture at the handiwork of the mystery person who could in no way, shape, or form be identified purely by looking at the (literal) writing on the wall.

"What does the letter say?" Chopper curiously asked. "Who wrote it?"

Ignoring Chopper's innocent question, Nami began to peruse the letter as quickly as she could. "Did...did he really just leave me a love letter? I...ah! Here's where the actual content comes in. 'P.S. I confirmed that Robin-chan is on this sea train. I'm boarding it now.'"

"Back up...ROBIN is on the train too?!" Greg took a few steps backwards in shock. "How...why...?!"

"I THOUGHT I smelled a trace of her here!" Chopper's eyes widened.

"He's not done yet!" Nami's eyes practically shot out of her face in

shock. "P.P.S. The kid, some thug with a pompadour, and'...wait...'USOPP have all been brought on board as well. If you look around, you should find a baby Den Den Mushi. I'm sure somebody will have one on the train, so I'll be able to get ahold of you. Think of this gift as an extension of me, my beloved! After I rush in and save them, perhaps we could go to a quiet spot and..." Nami stopped reading the note and shoved it in her pocket.

"Back that up...you're telling me that Sanji, Usopp, Robin, Steven, AND that Franky-guy are all on that sea train together?" Amethyst asked, putting the pieces together in her head.

"So it seems," Nami nodded, a grin appearing on her face. "This means Robin and Steven aren't alone! If Sanji managed to get there, then we'll get there too!" She sharply turned around and threw her hands in the air. "Guys, we need to find the others now! It's time to follow that train!"

"I THOUGHT YOU WERE THE SENSIBLE ONE!" Kokoro roared, pointing back toward the ocean. "You'll never make it out there!"

"Maybe so, but if there's one thing that I've learned about this crew, it's that these guys always manage to find a way to get the job done. Sanji being on the train only makes that even more certain," Nami told her. "What we need right now is to tell Luffy everything. If there is anyone who will get us to where we need to be, it's him."

"You aren't going to stop, are you?" Kokoro asked, gripping her bottle as her expression softened. "Fine...what the hell, I've got nothing better to do today. Ngagagaga!"

"Miss Kokoro?" Nami raised an eyebrow.

"If you kids are serious about braving the Aqua Laguna, meet me at the brick warehouse behind the garbage dump when you've got all of your friends together...I'll get you over to Enies Lobby before you know it," Kokoro explained as she walked away, drinking from her bottle. "Chimney and Gonbe, follow me! We've got some work to do!"

"Yay! Work!" Chimney cheered, racing after her grandmother.

With the Straw Hats now alone and confused, it was clear that the time had come to regroup as a whole and to cast aside any and all grudges they might have. The mission was clear: reach the Puffing Tom and/or storm Enies Lobby to get back their friends by any means necessary. Before leaving, Nami woke up the two conductors and asked them to get her two very important things: food and liquor. They then asked the Galley-La shipwrights to continue to help them find their friends, which they happily agreed to as they all took off. While Kokoro's secret way of getting there nagged at their brains, there was little time to talk to each other or even to acknowledge the ever-pounding weather. Instead, the group ran throughout Water Seven in unison, crying out for anyone to hear.

"LUFFY! WHERE ARE YOU?!" Nami shouted.

"ZORO!" Connie did the same. "WE NEED YOUR HELP!"

Greg frantically looked high and low for any sign of any of the missing crew. "PEARL! GARNET!"

"PERI!"

These were the cries echoing the streets. As this was going on, the waves continued to crash harder and stronger than they had done even before. It was getting harder and harder to see and it was difficult to even move without getting blasted with a gust of wind. Regardless of the limitations the weather brought them, they endured.

After what seemed like an eternity of screaming and shouting, the group finally ended up finding some familiar faces, although they were far more damaged than anyone was expecting. "Garnet! Pearl?! What the heck happened to you?!" Amethyst freaked out as her fellow Gems ran toward her with Paulie trailing behind them. "Who did this to you?!"

Pearl, who was gripping onto one of Zoro's swords, bit the bottom of her lip in anger. "It was government agents...they are the ones responsible for everything happening to Robin and managed to throw the captain and Zoro out into the city somewhere."

"Is that why you have his sword?!" Connie asked, distraught and frightened. "He wouldn't leave anywhere without one of his swords!"

"Blame the human leopard," Garnet scowled. "These humans are more powerful than anyone we have ever faced short of the admiral we encountered...perhaps even more."

"Bastards...bastards the whole bunch of them," Paulie spat at the ground.

"What about Steven?" Pearl looked around at the pirates and started to look concerned. "Where is he?"

"He's with Robin...and Sanji...and Usopp..." Connie blushed with frustration. "They've all been taken by the government."

"*WHAT?*!" Pearl shrieked in horror. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN STEVEN HAS BEEN CAPTURED?!"

"NO!" Garnet turned to the ocean as fast as she could. "The sea train is already gone..."

"That's not the only thing that's gone," Paulie's eyes widened. "Look at the ocean...it's pulled itself so far back that the sea floor is exposed..."

"What does that mean exactly?" Pearl whipped around.

"It means that the next wave is going to be larger than any Water Seven has ever seen...the back alleys are going to be decimated! We need to get everyone to high ground before it strikes! I'll go back and get that green kid from Scrap Island and you guys get as high up as you can!"

"Green..." Amethyst started before doing a double take. "Wait, Peridot?! Why is she playing with scraps at a time like this?!"

As Paulie started to run while ignoring Amethyst's question, Nami's line of vision landed toward the nearby back alleys that Paulie said would be destroyed. She was scanning the area, ignoring her companion's questions and urgings to get a move on. The navigator thought she saw something small in a building not too far from their

current position, but she couldn't locate it again. The weather might have made it nearly impossible to see by the untrained eye, but Nami's keen navigation skills had helped her get a better grasp of working in poor conditions. Finally, she found the irregularity after precious minutes of time was wasted. It was a small shape wedged between two buildings.

A shape that resembled a squished version of Monkey D. Luffy.

"*LUFFY?!* " Nami snapped, forgetting about her friends in the moment and jumping toward the exact place that Paulie had warned would be momentarily swept away in the Aqua Laguna. Running as hard as she could and ignoring the pleading cries begging her to return to safety, Nami continued to shout Luffy's name in the hopes he could hear her voice. She had no idea if he was awake or not, but she would keep calling until her vocal chords gave out.

"*LUFFY! LUFFY, YOU NEED TO GET UP AND OUT OF THERE! LUFFY?! LUFFY, PLEASE BE OKAY!* " Nami's voice echoed around Water Seven as she prayed that Luffy himself could hear her.

"*Nyami?* " Nami heard the faintest of replies coming from where she was headed. "*Nyami, awe you thewere?! Nyami, I got shtruck up hewre by the pigeongwuy and...* "

"*LUFFY, FOR ALL THAT IS SACRED AND HOLY, NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO JOKE! THEY TOOK ROBIN AWAY, LUFFY! THEY TOOK STEVEN! THEY EVEN TOOK USOPP TOO!* " Nami began to wail, tears streaking down her face.

"*Whawt?!* " Luffy asked himself in shock.

"*WE NEED YOU, LUFFY! WE NEED YOU TO GET THEM BACK! MISS KOKORO SAID SHE WOULD HELP US, BUT WE CAN'T SAVE THEM WITHOUT OUR CAPTAIN!* " Nami continued, pouring her heart and soul into her speech. "*DO YOU WANT TO LET THEM DOWN?!* "

"*PIRATE CAPTAIN LUFFY!* " the voice of Garnet chimed in. The tall Gem had managed to keep up with the navigator, but was surprisingly the only one who kept up. Her visit was gone and her

eyes were wide and desperate. "YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WHAT NICO ROBIN DID! SHE IS SACRIFICING HERSELF TO SAVE ALL OF US FROM AN ASSAULT FROM YOUR GOVERNMENT! SHE GAVE HERSELF UP TO DIE SO WE ALL COULD LIVE!"

"WHAT?!" Nami sharply turned to Garnet. "*THAT'S* WHAT HAS BEEN HAPPENING?!"

"Robin...lied about why she was lweaving?" Luffy called down after a moment of self-reflection. "She does want to be part of the cwrew?!"

"YES!" Garnet confirmed, turning her hands into gauntlets. It was now clear she was planning on freeing Luffy herself. "SHE NEEDS OUR HELP! STEVEN NEEDS OUT HELP! THE LIAR NEEDS OUR HELP! BUT WE NEED YOUR HELP FIRST!"

"I'M SO GLAD!" Luffy cried out with joy. "I WON'T LET ANYONE DIE TODAY!"

Garnet was about to strike the building, but was stopped by a large shadow rising overhead. The waves, which had all but disappeared before, had returned to a size even larger than the highest building in Water Seven. Desperation and fear was filled throughout the air as Garnet now had to quickly act to either save Luffy or protect Nami. Thankfully, a third option presented itself in the form of Luffy himself.

Newly empowered by the dedication to his crew, Luffy managed to push his prison of buildings aside, cracking them in the process. He leapt into the air, stretching his arms around Nami and Garnet as he made his way over them. He wrapped each one around his two arms and directed himself to the giant bridge toward the center of the island. At the exact same time, another force arrived on the scene: Pearl was riding Chopper with Zoro in tow. Amazingly, everybody had finally found each other.

And it was in this moment that the Aqua Laguna struck the bridge.

The six of them were dragged into the water before they had a chance to collect their bearings. However, luck was on their side in

the forms of Paulie and Amethyst, who had managed to use their ropes and whips to catch them before they were carried away. Beside them was Peridot, who was clutching onto a bag filled with scrap metal as if her life depended on it so she would not be swept away herself. Unfortunately for them, there was barely any time to thank their saviors, as the bridge they were on began to collapse into the sea, necessitating all of them to run for their lives back toward the inland, where the others were waiting for them with the remaining citizens of Water Seven and the members of Galley-La.

"So...so fast!" Luffy panted on the ground.

"The waves...the waves...the waves..." Peridot muttered absentmindedly as she collapsed onto her bag.

"Ho-How did you even get stuck in a smokestack?!" Pearl was complaining to Zoro, who was prying a frightened Chopper off of his face. "Even considering the circumstances, that isn't something that just happens!"

"STOP TRYING TO SUFFOCATE ME!" Zoro gasped, finally getting Chopper free. "AND DON'T JUDGE ME, PEARL! YOU TRY GETTING ASSAULTED BY A MAN WHO TURNS INTO A LEOPARD!"

"WHAT THE SHIT DID YOU THINK YOU WERE DOING?!" Paulie proceeded to yell at them as the citizens started circling around them. "THAT WAS SOME OF THE STUPIDEST, MOST RECKLESS..."

"Reckless as it was, it was necessary, rope-man," Garnet got up and bowed in respect. "Thank you for saving us when you did."

"I...it was nothing for the people who helped fight for Iceburg...but you could do us all a favor and put on some kind of clothes that are less form-fitting!" Paulie's face flushed.

"Dully noted," Garnet smiled.

"Guys! Oh, thank the stars that you are all okay!" Greg ran over to them, but tripped in a puddle as he did so. Using her quick reflexes,

Garnet managed to catch him before he hit the ground. "We have so much that we need to catch you up on! They've got Steven!"

"So I've heard," the Permafusion scowled in frustration. "We too have much to discuss before we can take any action. A large amount of information has been revealed to us that changes quite a bit of our perspective on this matter."

With that, everything was put out in the open for everyone to hear: Robin's true motivations, Steven's newfound "friends," Usopp and Franky getting caught in the middle of CP9's plan to acquire the Pluton plans, the departure of the Puffing Tom, and Sanji's unexpected intervention. Despite everyone feeling like garbage, the joint tales seemed to light back the spark of determination in all of the Straw Hats. It became rapidly clear what they had to do:

"It's settled then! We are going to follow that train!" Luffy punched his fist into his hand. "We need to leave now!"

"I suppose there is no other option, is there?" Zoro adjusted his swords and nodded at his captain.

"But didn't you hear what Nami said? There is no other train coming tonight! We can't leave by ship! What are you suggesting we do to catch them?" Pearl asked. "What is our plan?"

"My plan is to go after them and save them!"

"THAT'S A GOAL, NOT A PLAN!"

"Chillax, Pearl," Amethyst interjected. "That old train lady said that she'd help us get there. She seems to know what's up with all of this."

"Really?" Pearl inquired. "Do we know how she'll help us?"

"All she said was for us to meet her somewhere after we got everybody together. It looks to me like we are all here, so what are we standing around for?" Amethyst raised up her fist. "Let's go to that place!"

"And where exactly is that place again?"

The purple Gem blinked for a moment and then pointed at Nami. "She knows for sure where that place is!"

"I'm going to cut you off there," Paulie interjected. "Listen to me: this Aqua Laguna is absolutely unnatural. The size of those waves are unheard of here. There is nothing that Kokoro has that will get you there safely! What you should do is seek shelter for the night like we all are doing. We'll help you get a ship in the morning so you can follow them."

"But waiting until morning is a death sentence! Isn't that train headed for Enies Lobby? Isn't it headed for the Gates of Justice?!" Nami countered with vigor.

When nobody else in the crew showed signs of recognition, the navigator adopted a stern expression. "Enies Lobby is an island controlled by the World Government. It's the acting courthouse to put criminals on trial, but it's all a show. If you are sent to Enies Lobby, you are doomed to walk to a huge, cold steel door known as the 'Gates of Justice.' If you walk through them, you will never know joy or peace again...there are only two places one can go from that island: Marineford, which is the headquarters of the Marines is the first. The other is Impel Down..."

"That's where Mr. 2 asked to be sent back in Alabasta!" Connie exclaimed. "It's your world's toughest prison, right?"

"That's an understatement. It's basically hell for pirates and criminals alike. If you end up there, you are never seen again. It's all one giant place of torture and death. That is where every person that has walked through Enies Lobby has ended up in! Enies Lobby is the personification of the corrupt, horrible government that runs our world! It's just an empty shell designed to look like 'Justice!' Am I wrong?!"

When nobody from Water Seven answered her with anything but concerned and defeated looks, Nami merely continued. "Robin has had a bounty on her head since she was eight and Steven? Steven has a bounty for no reason whatsoever! They'll die if we don't act right now! It's like Greg said before: it's our job to be there for them! We might have the slimmest chance in the world to do it, but am I

wrong in saying that we won't take that chance?!"

"NO!" the Straw Hats declared in unison.

"Every second we waste here is another second we could have used to save them. If the train-woman has the means to get us to our destination, I suggest we see what she has to offer," Garnet reproduced her visor with determination. "Pirate Captain Luffy, the Crystal Gems are ready when you are."

"ARE YOU NUTS?! YOU ARE FORGETTING ONE MAJOR THING: YOU'RE PIRATES TOO! IF YOU SOMEHOW MANAGE TO GET THERE, YOU'LL BE TARGETED WITHOUT MERCY! ARE YOU REALLY GOING TO PICK A FIGHT WITH THE VERY HEART OF THE WORLD GOVERNMENT?!" Paulie snapped, whipping his rope to the ground dramatically.

"They have my nakama," Luffy told him bluntly. "Get out of the way or join the fight!"

"I won't let you get yourselves killed!" Paulie lowered his voice, gripping the middle of his weapon. "If I have to fight you, I will!"

"Oy! There you kids are! I'm glad you aren't dead!" the familiar sounds of Kokoro's voice came between the two men, clearly drunk yet calm. "Why the hell are you all just standing around here? I thought I told you to get to the warehouse when you found everyone!"

"Miss Kokoro!" Nami swiftly turned around, not expecting to see her there whatsoever. "We..."

"Ah, save it. It'll all fine with me! Ngagagaga!" the elderly woman laughed. "I take it by what I can hear over this weather that you kids are still suicidal enough to risk your lives for your friends?"

"Damn straight, we are!" Luffy cracked his knuckles. "You have a ship that we can use to catch up with that train, lady?"

"Nope! A ship wouldn't be able to survive the Aqua Laguna..." Kokoro took another swig of her drink and wiped her mouth. "If you want to catch a sea train, you need to ride a sea train!"

She started to walk back toward where she came, chuckling along the way. "You kids coming or what?"

"I...wait, I thought you said that there was only one train!" Greg called out, his face a mixture of confusion and hope.

"Only one working train! This train hasn't been touched for twelve years and isn't meant for passengers to ride. How do you kids feel about riding a runaway sea train? Ngagagaga!"

GWMAPT

"Shitty rain and waves! It'd be a miracle if I could get this damn cigarette to light!" Sanji grunted from the outside of the moving sea train as water splashed his face. "How the hell am I going to sneak around and save everybody if I can't even get a light?!"

The chef of the Straw Hats had miraculously been in the right place at the right time. After his precious Robin-chan rejected his friendship, Sanji decided not to return to the others with Chopper, but rather he kept roaming around Water Seven for any trace of her. As he searched along, he inevitably came across the sea train he was now riding. Given her desire to leave the crew, Sanji expected that she would try to leave via the train and had hoped to talk her out of it. However, things did not progress as he was expecting.

As he was watching from afar, Sanji could not help but notice the overwhelming amount of suited men congregating around the station. This was even heightened after a large group of people left the island, presumably to avoid the oncoming Aqua Laguna. But the kicker to all of the madness was when two individuals carried a familiar face onto the train: Steven Universe.

Sanji regarded Steven as highly as he could for somebody who was not Nami, Robin, or Petrea. While he thought the youth was a bit naive at times, the chef appreciated his heart. It helped quite a bit that he was the first Straw Hat who encountered the youth and managed to indirectly get him, Petrea, Damian, Genevieve, Greg, Connie, and the Gems involved with all of the Straw Hat shenanigans that typically took place. He knew that he was a bit too wide-eyed and innocent, but there were times that being innocent

was not a bad thing.

A childhood is not something that should be wasted. Sanji truly believed that.

Even if Robin was not going to appear on the train, Sanji knew he would have to do something about this. He didn't know exactly how to contact the others yet, but he assumed they would arrive soon enough. They always ended up being exactly where they needed to be at the right time. Sanji had faith in his crew because they earned it. Discounting the chefs at the Baratie, they were the closest thing to family Sanji had ever known. This was the kind of family that Sanji could rely on and it was his sworn duty to rescue the youth he considered to be a little brother.

The situation was further complicated when, as expected, Robin appeared on the platform, seemingly surrendering herself to these men. It became clearer and clearer that these individuals were stooges of the World Government, making this increasingly more dire than he first thought. Too add insult to injury, more members of the World Government arrived with two prisoners in tow. One was an odd-looking guy with blue hair and the other...the other was Usopp. How HE factored into everything was beyond Sanji's comprehension, but it didn't really matter if he left the crew the night before. Family was family. What Usopp did after the fact was inconsequential so long as Sanji got him out of this.

As it became increasingly more apparent that the others would not arrive in time, Sanji was given no other option but to take matters into his own hands alone. Leaving a subtle message for Nami behind, the blond jumped onto the rear deck of the last car of the train and kept himself hidden from the enemy. As the train sped along away from Water Seven to parts unknown, Sanji knew he had to think of a plan to save Robin and the others in the quickest and most efficient way possible...all while making her think of him as her knight in shining armor.

Imagine Sanji's surprise when the door of the car opened up, revealing a suited man checking out the weather. "Damn; this storm is really raging. The faster we get to Enies Lobby, the better. I..."

In that moment, both people locked eyes in shock. Neither knew exactly how to react to each other, but it was Sanji who did so first. **"COLLIER COUP!"** One mighty kick later and the agent was sent flying into the train car, alerting an entire group of armed men to Sanji's presence. Upon seeing the exact situation Sanji was now in, the chef sighed. "Shit..."

"Who the hell are you?! That was no normal kick!" one of them shouted at him, aiming his pistol directly at him. "You are clearly a person of interest!"

"Shucks," Sanji scratched the back of his head as he now lit his cigarette. "If you said that to my face, I might just blush..."

"THAT WASN'T A COMPLIMENT!"

"This scumbag isn't taking us seriously! Get Lucci on the Den Den Mushi! He needs to know about this!" another man told the rest of them.

"Now, now...let's not get hasty," a new voice told them. "We don't need to get CP9 involved if it is just one guy. After all..."

Looking up for the source of the voice, Sanji saw an incredibly large man taking up the ceiling of the car. His long legs were literally surrounding the door Sanji entered in, thus showing why Sanji did not notice him upon entering. He wore glasses and had facial hair. The man just sneered down at Sanji like a person to an ant. "...in this car, I am your protector. I'm Jerry: a member of CP6 from the Karate Island on the South Blue. I am the most skilled person there, do you get it? I am a boxing legend!"

"I...okay," Sanji shrugged, not even caring to question it. "Let's see some karate then."

"Jerry's Aurora Flicker Jab!" Wasting no time, Jerry sent out a flurry of punches and jabs at Sanji, who jumped right out of the way. As such, he ended up striking his men instead of Sanji. Noticing this, the long-legged man looked between them to see Sanji right behind him. "Ah. Kid, do you really think you'll win because you are trying to use my size against me? I work better in confined spaces."

"Big words for a guy threatening me in between his legs."

"Don't you get it? My boxing style can be adapted into yoga techniques! **Yoga One Two!**" Moving his legs behind his head, Jerry was now small enough to comfortably attack from the front. Unfortunately for him, doing so shortened the range of his punches, as they were holding his legs back.

"ARE YOU AN IDIOT?!" Sanji yelled at him.

"Not at all, boy. It's all part of the plan!" Jerry laughed as he launched himself at Sanji, his body twirling around like a screwdriver. "**SCREW DROP KICK!**"

"SINCE WHEN DOES BOXING INVOLVE FEET?!" Sanji shouted. Finally, he took a drag of his cigarette and frowned. "Screw this. This is wasting my time! **BROCHETTE!**" He jumped up in the air just as Jerry was about to strike him and delivered his own spinning kick down onto the CP6 Agent, causing him to crash into the floor of the car.

As the other men in the car observed as Sanji got up without even panting while their greatest champion was collapsed and knocked out near a pile of discarded masks. The chef, adjusting his tie, glanced over at them and silently went to work, wiping out the entire car in an instant. "If this is the best the government has to offer, this will be a piece of cake. Then again, it's smart to leave your weakest men behind...eh, who gives a shit?"

GWMAPT

The crew (save Nami, who claimed that she needed to check on something) stood in awe in front of a giant sea train hidden away in an almost undisturbed workshop. While similar in design to the Puffing Tom, it's biggest difference was the shark face drawn on the front of the machine. Luffy, Chopper, Amethyst, Connie, and Greg just found themselves fawning at the sight of the train while Peridot, discarding the giant bag of scrap she had been dragging (or, technically, Garnet had been carrying after Peridot took too long to keep up with the others), bounced back and forth around the entire locomotive to examine every piston and screw. She instantly pulled

out a small tape recorder and began to speak into it.

"Log Date: 7 13.5 12. The aquatic transport machine from the Grand Line is incredible! It is clearly structurally completed, but it seems to have been settled in place for some time! I need to examine the inside to determine just why this would not be considered seafaring...the crude animal drawings on the front of the vehicle suggests a deeper purpose that is worth looking into at a later entry..."

"Actually, its there just because I felt like it!" Kokoro interjected into the recorder. "Sorry to build your hopes up!"

"Oh..." Peridot's face fell. Quickly, she turned around to hide herself and whispered back into the device. "The train-human's claims are seemingly valid, but further examination will still be required in the future..."

"So, this train is unable to stop once it is on the tracks?" Pearl inquired, curious about the train herself. "Why is that the case? Why didn't you fix that when you were building the other train?"

"Eh...long story short, the builder of both of these trains didn't have enough time to fix this one after he perfected the Puffing Tom," Kokoro shrugged, her expression looking sullen for only a moment. However, her drunken smile quickly returned when it became clear they were not alone. "Well, I'll be damned! Glad to see you are still alive! When did you get here?"

"ICEPOPS!" Luffy cheered. "YOU'RE HERE TOO!"

Indeed, the mayor of Water Seven walked right out of the train and wiped his brow. It was clear that he had been at work despite his injuries from his traitorous workers. "I'm glad you made it out in one piece, Straw Hat. I never doubted you. I made it here right after you left, Kokoro. We both appeared to have the same idea, but you beat me here. I finished the calibrations, so it should be ready to ride...after all, we can't leave these fools to their own devices, can we?"

"Ngagagaga! Damn straight!"

"Thank you for fixing the train for us, Mr. Mayor," Connie called to him. "This locomotive is just...awe-inspiring!"

"Save your thanks, little girl," Iceburg explained. "Rocket Man here is a flawed train. Once it starts, it isn't stopping. You might make it to Enies Lobby, but you'll have to figure out a way to get back here...or you might not make it at all and die."

"Sounds good enough for me! Thanks, Icepops!" Luffy grinned and ran toward the train before stopping and clutching his stomach. "Ugh...it hurts!"

"Oh no! We need a doctor! Clearly he is still hurt from before!" Chopper quickly rushed to his side.

"That's still you," Garnet pointed out.

"YOU'RE RIGHT!" Chopper shrieked. "Did you lose too much blood? Is it your heart?"

It was at that moment that Nami burst into the room with the two train conductors in tow. Both men were transporting a gigantic bundle that was larger than all three of them combined. "Hey! Sorry we took so long! Don't leave just yet!"

"Oy! Get on the train! We need to go!" Luffy protested from the side of the train. "Hurry up!"

"...there's another sea train here?! How did we not know about this?!" the train conductors were commenting in awe.

"Where have you been?! What's with the giant bag?!" Luffy continued to yell, clearly impatient and wanting to rescue his friends.

She set the bag inside of the train and unveiled its contents: "I brought provisions!"

Upon seeing a bounty of food and liquor set before their eyes, Luffy and Amethyst began to gorge themselves while practically weeping with joy. While nowhere near as ravenous, Greg and Connie also ran over to eat, having barely eaten for the entire day due to being on the run. Along those same lines, Zoro allowed himself to truly

smile as he examined the various bottles of rum that he was provided with, his eyes sparkling with delight at the thought of drinking himself right before the edge of being sloppy.

"I'M VERY SORRY FOR YELLING AT YOU!" Luffy managed to get out between breaths.

"I...I have no words for what I am seeing here," Pearl commented, half repulsed and half amused.

"If you...if you aren't joining in their reverie, I could use some...ugh...assistance in bringing my own load of materials onto this manned rocket," Peridot requested as she tried to drag her bag closer to the train, panting all the way.

"For someone who was very gung-ho about this rescue mission, I still don't know why you diverted yourself away from us when we passed this...whatever this is," Pearl folded her arms before bending down to help the Homeworld Gem. "Why are you collecting human trash?"

"Nyehehehe! Silly Pearl! You fail to see the bounty of treasure that these shipwrights left for the picking!" Peridot laughed with glee as Pearl gently placed the bag of scraps inside of the train, Garnet and Chopper following behind them. "You saw a garbage mound; I saw raw materials to build from! If I am to singlehandedly rescue Nico Robin, I will need to invent some kind of Grand Line limb enhancers or weapons to give me the advantage I need to count those 'Six Powers!' This metal is crude, but I have every confidence in myself to take the worst materials and make it into the best! It's like the metal spoke to me...but you wouldn't understand considering that you are a P...parry machine with your staffs...yes! That's what I was meaning by that comment!"

Pearl couldn't help but warm up at the Gem. It was very clear that she was still very much indoctrinated in Homeworld beliefs, but she was doing her best to shed them more and more every day. If she was doing her best, then Pearl would continue to do her best to not judge her for any slip-ups she might have, especially since Pearl was facing similar challenges of her own in regards to the adjustment to the pirate life. In the end, Pearl merely chuckled. "If

you say so, Peridot the inventor."

Still, the dainty Gem was concerned about two things in particular: Greg and Connie's presence aboard the sea train. While it was true that they have been involved up until this very moment, the fact of the matter was that they were clearly headed into a war zone that would result in clear defiance to the current governing body of this world. Greg might be his own person, but she could not find any way to justify such a scenario to the Maheswaran family. The young girl looked up at her as she approached, her posture instantly becoming defensive. "Connie..."

"Pearl, I know what you are going to say, and it doesn't matter. I'm going too."

"Connie..."

"Steven needs me! I need to be there for him! Can't this be considered training? I know my mom will be mad, but I need to do this!" Connie protested.

"I can't in good conscious..." Pearl gulped, trying to find the right words.

"She's coming," Luffy interjected as he ate. "Captain's orders."

Pearl looked shocked as she swiftly faced him. "But her parents..."

"Think of it like this," Zoro cast aside a bottle in record time. "If they have a problem with it, they'll blame us, not you. Besides, the kid can hold her own in a fight. I think she'll have a better chance of making it out of this than we do."

"Do you really mean it?!" Connie's eyes turned into diamonds.

"I...I suppose that just means I will have to stay close to you to examine your form," Pearl shot the swordsman a look, but knew there was very little that she could do to stop her besides leaving her with complete strangers on an island that was being bombarded by the sea. The only other alternative was Greg, but she could see a look of determination on the man's face behind the food he shared with the others. This was a man who would go to the ends of the

world for his son, and Pearl could not help but respect that, her own feelings toward the man notwithstanding.

Her train of thought was cut short by Connie herself, who had run over and thrown her arms around the Gem. Tears were now in her eyes, but they were tears of hope, not just sadness. "Thank you, Pearl! Thank you for giving me this chance!"

"Whelp, is that it then?" Kokoro called to them from the front of the train. "If there's nobody else that we are waiting on, I'll get this puppy started and we'll be on the tracks to Enies Lobby in no time!"

"Are you sure you'll be able to handle this?" Iceburg asked her, walking up from the outside of the train.

"Eh. I'm an old pro at this kind of stuff. Don't worry about me. Worry about healing yourself...and keep an eye out for Chimney and Gonbe. They were supposed to stay here with the train, but I haven't seen them. They're probably playing around somewhere..."

"They weren't here when I got here, but I'll watch out for them," Iceburg nodded. "I guess it's time to..."

"WAIT! STRAW HAT!" a new voice rang out from the door. Unexpectedly, the entirety of the battered and broken Franky Family were standing there. All of them were clearly still fighting off the injuries given to them from the day before, but they stood there determined and pleading.

"Damn it. We don't have time for this," Zoro scowled.

"Agreed," Pearl nodded, turning toward the bruised thugs. "Excuse me, Franky people! We are in quite a hurry right now, so please just let us be!"

"We know you are in a hurry! Those Galley-La guys told us you were going to Enies Lobby to save your friends! Those government guys took our bro too! We...we..." Zambai stammered, now fully sobbing with all of his heart. "WE WANT TO COME TOO! TAKE US WITH YOU!"

"Wha...?" Pearl fell backwards in shock.

"You know who we are facing and still want to come with us?" Kokoro asked from the train. "You'd be attracting a whole lot of attention to yourselves..."

"WHO CARES!"

"YEAH! WE'D DIE FOR OUR BIG BRO!" Kiwi wailed.

"YOU JUST HAVE TO HELP US!" Mozu added, equally wailing.

All eyes were now on Luffy, waiting for him to make the final call on what to do about this situation. Before he answered, Nami slammed her hand on the inside of the train. "Really?! After all that you did to us?! After stealing my money?!"

"WE KNOW! WE ARE SWALLOWING OUR PRIDE HERE!" Zambai and the other members of the Frank Family fell to their knees. "WE A BEGGING YOU! WE WANT OUT BRO BACK!"

"Okay!" Luffy nodded. "Get on already!"

"WHAT?!" Nami turned quickly toward her captain.

"They'll be fine!" Luffy laughed.

"THANK YOU!" they shouted at once, cheering with joy.

"But we don't actually have to be IN the train with you guys! We can hitch up our King Bulls and ride in the back after you start up!" Zambai offered, wiping away his tears.

"Uh...okay?" Luffy was clearly confused, but nodded anyway.

"Perfect! Be back soon!" In a snap, the Franky Family was gone, leaving the Rocket Man by itself.

In no time at all, the train was ready for departure. There was a complete sense of determination and focus amongst the passengers of the train. Everyone knew what they were doing was suicidal, but it did not matter. This was a matter of life and death with a singular goal in mind. This was a goal worth fighting for. This was a goal worth going to war far.

This was the power of friendship and family personified.

"Alright, crew! Let's go and get back our nakama!" Luffy commanded to everyone on the train.

"Ngagagaga!" Kokoro laughed as she began to start the engine.

"'Nakama!' Now that's an expression I haven't heard in years! Pirates still use that phrase for their crew?"

"Eh? What are you talking about, granny? Shanks called the guys 'nakama' all the time!"

"'Red Haired' Shanks? That explains it...the older generation used it far more frequently. I'm sure he picked it up when he was your age too...brings back some good memoirs of Tom," Kokoro smiled as she made the final adjustments. "Strap yourselves in, kids! Don't get yourselves rattled! Runaway sea train Rocket Man departing Water Seven to Enies Lobby!"

"At last! We're off!" Luffy punched his fist, sitting on the top of the train with glee.

In one giant motion, the train shot through the canal connected inside of the workshop and out into the ocean. At the same time, a houseboat pulled by two gigantic yagara bulls made their way toward them and successfully latched onto the runaway train...even though the process almost destroyed the train itself. The Franky Houseboat had shot out a giant log of wood with spikes embedded in it into the back of the train and pulled itself as close as it could. Regardless of the damage it caused, the sea train caravan was now complete.

"This...this would make one heck of an album cover," Greg commented to himself.

"Dude, everything we've seen here would make a good album cover," Amethyst pointed out.

"Yes. Yes they would."

"STRAW HAT! WE ARE THE FRANKY FAMILY! ALL FIFTY OF US PLEDGE OURSELVES TO YOU! WE ARE FOREVER IN YOUR

DEBT!" Zambai howled from the houseboat. "THANK YOU FOR THE LIFT!"

"Ugh...don't push your luck," Zoro commented, glaring at the damage the Franky Family caused with disdain.

"Listen up, everybody!" Kokoro announced over to all of the passengers. "I'd strap yourselves in. We are about to latch onto the tracks! The waves ended up carrying them quite a bit off course...but don't worry! I've been working sea trains since the beginning, so don't underestimate me!"

"Are you guys sure you don't want to come in here?" Greg called out to the Franky Family, amplifying his voice to reach to them.

"Ha! This will be nothing for Sodom and Gamorrah to handle! Bring it on!" Zambai chuckled from the outside, motioning to the two King Bulls.

GWMAPT

"THAT...THAT WAS WAY TOO INTENSE FOR US!" Zambai panted from inside of the train. "THANK YOU FOR LETTING US IN!"

After nearly getting blown away by Kokoro's maneuvering of the sea train, the Franky Family had realized that being outside in the middle of the Aqua Laguna was a terrible idea. They were not alone: Luffy had also relocated himself into the train.

It was also clear that there were several stowaways as well.

"The train picked up so much speed! It was so cool!" Chimney cheered with Gonbe joining in. She had barely been dragged inside after Kokoro noticed them hanging outside on the front of the train.

"What did you expect? This is a runaway train! That implies...oh, never mind!" Pearl sighed, not wanting to get into specifics with a young girl who clearly would not be able to follow along.

"I think I threw out my back!" Lulu the Galley-La carpenter groaned.

"You're not the only one, buddy," Greg agreed before doing a

double take. "Wait...who are you?!"

"A better question is why the hell are you here?!" Zoro roared at the three Galley-La stowaways: Paulie, Lulu, and Tilestone.

"Look, the people who took your friends tried to kill the mayor. Since I couldn't stop you idiots, I figured I would join you!" Paulie folded his arms as he puffed a cigar. "I can't speak for these two...this has nothing to do with Galley-La so I don't know why they are here!"

"WE FOLLOWED YOU BECAUSE WE FIGURED YOU KNEW HOW TO AVENGE ICEBURG!" Tilestone shouted as loud as he could.

"And it seems like we were right. You can't stop us on this one...we're in this together!" Lulu nodded.

"We want to know what we are up against!" Kiwi added.

"Yeah! We want to know who took our bro!" Mozu agreed.

"I think we've got a good idea about that...nobody would shock us at this point. We aren't dense or anything," Lulu told them.

"That makes sense. Given the fact that they mysteriously disappeared before the storm hit, it'd be obvious to realize that Kaku, Lucci, Blueno, and Kalifa were the ones behind this," Paulie shrugged. "They work for the World Government...who knew?"

Lulu and Tilestone both nodded, taking in the information rather well. In a split second, their faces dropped as their worldview was shattered before their eyes. "WHAT?!"

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN 'WHAT?!'" Paulie freaked out. "WHO THE HELL DID YOU THINK WAS BEHIND IT?!"

"Michael and Hoichael from the Back Alleys!" Tilestone stammered.

"Me too!" Lulu wiped the sweat off of his face. "I was sure of it!"

"WHO THE HELL ARE THEY?!" Paulie and Zoro shouted in unison.

"No, it's true," Pearl interjected. She put her hands to her forehead and allowed her gemstone to project the confrontation at Iceburg's mansion for everyone to see. "You've been deceived and betrayed by those who you called friends! Does this make you want to turn back?"

"No way!" Tilestone and Lulu shouted.

"That's good," Luffy stood up. "Listen up! I know we have all had our problems in town, but we all have the same enemy! They attacked Icepops! They took your bro! They took our nakama! We are going to get them back...but the guy with the pigeon is the strongest of them all. No matter what happens, I'm the one who is going to kick his ass!"

"Pirate Captain Luffy is right. Those masked individuals are probably the strongest members of their organization. We need to get to them in order to end this," Garnet extended her hand to clasp Luffy's arm. "The Crystal Gems are with you."

"As is the Franky Family!" Zambai did the same to Garnet's.

"So are we," Paulie joined them, grabbing Zambai's arm as Luffy grabbed his.

"Then it is settled. From this moment on, we are comrades in arms!" Luffy told them all. "Any objections?"

"NO!" everybody but Nami punched the sky for emphasis, signaling the alliance and forging bonds of friendship.

Nami, on the other hand, was fearfully looking out of the window. She returned her attention to the group, her face white as a ghost. "Guys, we...we are headed directly into a giant wave that is larger than the train! We need to...to...Miss Kokoro, why aren't you steering the train?!"

The conductor, who was busy knocking back drinks with Zoro, laughed in her direction. "Didn't you hear me? This is a runaway train! The second the train hit the rails, I lost control of the situation."

"But...but...the wave!" Nami stammered, pointing out the window.

"I REFUSE TO LET ANY WAVE GET IN OUR WAY! OUR FRIENDS ARE WAITING FOR US THERE AND WE ARE GOING TO ACCOMPLISH WHAT WE SET OUT TO DO!" Luffy threw his hands up.

"But how...?!"

"Simple: let's kick its ass!" Luffy announced.

"THAT'S NOT HOW THAT WORKS!"

GWMAPT

Back on the Puffing Tom, Sanji had finished kicking down opponents left and right. The second thing he noticed about the car he was presently occupied in was the multiple Den Den Mushis that were placed around the room...the first were two tied-up occupants. One was very familiar to him and the other he had not yet been properly introduced.

"SANJI?! WHAT...HOW...YOU'RE HERE TOO?!" Usopp shrieked from his captivity once all of the car was cleared of World Government agents.

"I could ask the same question to you...but I'm more interested about him," Sanji pointed his cigarette toward the blue-haired prisoner. "You. What's your story?"

As Sanji examined the various communication devices, the other man cocked his head in confusion. "Hmm...he's one of your friends, long-nose?"

"Ex-friend!" both of them replied in unison, even if Sanji didn't really mean it...on some level.

"Whatever. I'm the head of the underworld in Water Seven: Franky the Dismantler!"

It took Sanji a minute to think about why that name seemed familiar to him before it clicked. The only "Franky" that Sanji knew was the shitty bastard who started all of their problems...the one who had his men steal their money. "YOU SHITTY ASSHOLE! YOU STOLE

OUR MONEY AND BEAT UP OUR FRIEND! I'LL FILLET YOUR HIDE AND SERVE IT AS AN APPETIZER!"

"WAIT! IT'S OKAY! HE'S ON OUR SIDE NOW! A LOT HAS CHANGED!" Usopp tried to plead with the chef. "HE TRIED TO SAVE THE MERRY BEFORE...before..."

Sanji noticed Usopp's attitude completely shift to one of sadness and somberness. Clearly something had happened to their ship since they left Usopp, but there was no time to learn exactly what it was.

"Look, before you guys start crying or whatever, can I please get untied?" Franky asked.

"NO!" Sanji snarled at him.

"We are going to need him if we are going to get out of here! He's strong and we are surrounded!" Usopp shouted. "We need to move before somebody realizes that we are aboard here!"

The blond muttered something to himself, frustrated at the situation, before relenting and untying Franky. "Let's get to the roof of this train. I want to use one of these Den Den Mushi to contact Nami-chan. She needs to know that you guys, Robin-san, and Steven are here."

As they began to move, Sanji ignored Usopp's questions about Steven's presence and focused on keeping his balance on top of the moving vehicle in the terrible weather. Thankfully, the occupants in the next car had not actually heard the commotion going on, so they still had the element of surprise on their hands, but it would not last forever...especially with Usopp screaming like a child while being carried by Franky.

"Let's see if this contraption works..." Sanji told himself as he played around with the snail phone. "Nami-chan? Nami-chan? Are you there?"

"Sanji!" a familiar and beautiful voice replied from the other side of the line, the sound of which nearly caused Sanji to lose all

composition and scream out in joy.

Then her voice was drowned out by cannon-fire and the chef was immediately concerned. "What's going on over there? Are you hurt?!"

"We're fine...kind of...we are on a second train about to hit a giant wave and we are trying to shoot our way through it with little success. Listen, while those idiots are doing that, I want to fill you guys in on what's going on!" Nami told him. "Robin...she gave herself up to the World Government to save our lives. She thinks that letting herself die is...is going to fix anything."

"Shitty World Government bastards!" Sanji frowned. "What about the kid? How does he play into this?"

"We really don't know why...we think it's because of his gem."

"'Gem?' Wait...the kid from the bar? That kid is here too?! What the heck did he do?!" Franky's jaw dropped in shock.

"But it sounds like things are intensifying here. Luffy, Zoro, and the Gems just jumped outside..." Nami explained as her voice was overtaken by music...music that seemed oddly fitting.

GWMAPT

With the giant wave inching closer and closer, it was beginning to look hopeless. The Franky Family and Galley-La shipwrights began to man cannons from the Franky Houseboat, but their cannon-fire was having no effect on clearing a path in the ocean.

"Keep it up, kids! If that wave hits us, the Rocket Man won't last a minute!" Kokoro called to them.

"ARE YOU TELLING ME WE ARE GOING TO DIE?!" Chopper panicked.

"GAH! DON'T TELL ME THAT!" Greg freaked out, running around with Chopper in a circle.

"Please calm down, Mr. Universe! You too, Chopper!" Connie (who

was forced to stay behind on Pearl's orders) begged them. "We can't panic like this!"

"PANICKING SEEMS LIKE A VERY GOOD IDEA RIGHT NOW!"

Peridot shouted from behind a chair with Chimney and Gonbe crouched beside them.

"Eh, the kid is right. Whatever's gonna happen is gonna happen. I'd just sit back and enjoy the ride!" Kokoro smiled.

"I don't think I can do that..." Greg began to pant and collapsed near a window. "I'm gonna try to calm myself down over there. Yeah. That sounds good...I need to be ready for this..."

Outside, the waves were crashing the side of the train and all of them were soaked. The wind was howling and nothing was seemingly working. What the Straw Hats needed was a miracle.

"WE ARE GOING TO CRASH!" the Franky Family was not faring much better, their weapons being practically useless.

"STOP WHINING AND DO SOMETHING!" Paulie chided them. He turned his attention to the Gems, Luffy, and Zoro, who were now right beside him. "Straw Hat, we need a plan! Give us something...anything!"

"You and the others just keep firing front and center and leave the rest to us!" Zoro commanded. "We'll take it from here!"

"That's fine...but what the hell are you people going to do?!"

"Improvise," Garnet replied.

As the Franky Family prepared one final volley of blasts, a noise began to rise from inside of the sea train. It was faint at first; but miraculously, it was soon heard and felt by all of those outside. "***She packed my bags last night, preflight. Zero hour, nine a.m. And I'm gonna be high as a kite by then...***" the voice of Greg sang, growing louder and louder by the second. "***I miss the earth so much...I miss my wife. It's lonely out in space on such a timeless flight.***"

"Is...is that Greg?" Amethyst asked the others. "Why's Greg singing at a time like this...and why can we hear him?"

"We all cope with stress in our own ways," Garnet cracked her neck. "Lead the charge, Pirate Captain Luffy."

"Hmm...there's something about this music..." Luffy closed his eyes, feeling the beat of the music and looking down at his hands. "You thinking what I'm thinking, Zoro?"

"Fire a cannon?" Zoro asked.

"Fire a cannon. What's five times one hundred and eight?" Luffy asked as the wave grew closer and closer, referencing the name of one of Zoro's attacks.

"Five hundred and forty," Pearl answered without hesitation.

"Geez, that's a mouthful!" Luffy pouted. "Let's round it to six hundred!"

"Whatever," Zoro muttered, preparing his swords to fight the storm.

"Sounds good to me," Garnet shrugged, creating her gauntlets.

"LET'S BLAST THIS WAVE!" Amethyst cheered.

As Luffy, Zoro, and the Gems stood strong to face the wave head on, Greg's singing could still be heard over the crashing of the waves. It was as if the group was reacting in rhythm to his song, using it as their guide to launch their final stand against the Aqua Laguna. ***"And I think it's gonna be a long, long, time 'til touchdown brings me 'round again to find I'm not the man they think I am at home. Oh, no no no...I'm a rocket man!"***

At that moment, all five of them attacked the waves at once. **"GUM-GUM..."** Luffy roared.

"GAUNTLET..." Garnet thrust her arms backwards in preparation.

"PURPLE TWISTER..." Amethyst began to twirl her whips around as fast as they could.

"PEARL PRECISION..." Pearl announced as she moved her staffs together in an elegant fashion.

"SIX HUNDRED POUND..." Zoro declared while swinging his swords.

"CANNON!" all five warriors shouted in unison.

Multiple things began to happen at once: Luffy punched the waves with all of his might, Pearl and Zoro slashed at the air, Amethyst used her whips to create a wind spiral to crash into the center of the waves, and Garnet shot her gauntlets directly into them. The combined forces of all five of the strongest members of the crew on the Rocket Man landed at the same time, opening up a small tunnel directly in front of them. It had happened...they had done it...

The sea train made it through the Aqua Laguna unscathed. At the exact moment they crossed through, Greg's voice grew louder and louder, building to a powerful crescendo:

"ROCKET MAN! Burnin' out this fuse up here alone..."

GWMAPT

Back on the Puffing Tom, a jubilation of cheering could be heard. The group was rightly celebrating their victory in overcoming the Aqua Laguna. Sanji was relieved to hear the good news, but he was still highly concerned for what was to come ahead. He could not get the image of Robin sacrificing her life for any of them out of his head...

It was unacceptable for a lady such as her to even dare talk like that.

"Straw Hat, you were amazing!" a female voice could be heard from the background.

"Eh? That sounded like...nah..." Franky tried to listen in, but couldn't hear much over the storm. "They wouldn't have come after me..."

"Luffy! You need to come over here! I've got Sanji on the line!" Nami yelled to the captain, who had clearly reentered the train.

"Are you there, Luffy?" Sanji spoke into the receiver.

"SANJI!" Luffy screamed from the other side. "ARE YOU OKAY?! WHERE'S STEVEN AND ROBIN AND...?!"

"Calm down," Sanji told him. "Robin and Steven are both here, but I haven't gotten to them yet. Nami-chan filled me in. Any way you want me to handle this?"

"Yeah: *tear things up!* Don't stop until you get our nakama back!"

"DON'T BE SO CARELESS, LUFFY! MAKE HIM WAIT UNTIL WE CATCH UP!" the grating voice of Zoro added. "Idiot cook, listen up! You can't face those guys on your own! They are way too strong and..."

"Oy! Let him be," Luffy interjected. "You know he's going to do it anyway. If you were over there, we wouldn't be able to stop you...right?"

"Bingo," Sanji nodded. "Gee, moss-head; if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were worried about me..."

"GO TO HELL!"

"I'll never be in hell so long as there are beautiful women in the world...women like Robin-san. Even without hearing what Nami-chan told me, I was going to destroy this place...but now? *Now I'm not holding back!*" For emphasis, Sanji crushed the receiver of the Den Den Mushi, effectively ending the conversation right there.

"So all of that happened in one day?" Usopp asked. "Robin, Steven...all of it?"

"That's right. Robin doesn't even know about the Merry yet...let alone your fight with Luffy. She sacrificed herself for all of us, even you."

"OH MAN! THIS STORY! HOW MOVING, MAN!" Franky sobbed his eyes out, blowing his metal nose as tears poured down his face.

Sanji raised a curly eyebrow at the cyborg. "Why the hell are you

crying?"

"SHUT UP! I'M NOT CRYING!" Franky immediately stopped doing so, trying to play it off like it was nothing. "Robin...holy crap. All of us, all of the world...we all have been led to believe that she is the worst, most heartless criminal in the world! But this display of emotions...how can that be?!"

"It can be because that's a load of horse shit. She's in the first car of this train. I'm going after her. Either join me or get the hell out of my way," Sanji told him. "We'll find the kid along the way...his shield should protect him from too much harm..."

"Say no more, my curly-eyebrowed companion! I, Franky: the master builder of the Franky Family, will assist you in stopping the World Government from taking your friends away...for reasons I don't want to get into now...let's just say I don't want her to get taken by the World Government or else I'd be in trouble too..."

"Whatever. Let's go, long-nose," Sanji called to Usopp, who had gotten up from the top of the train. "We've got a damsel in distress to save."

"I'll...I'll just stay here," Usopp told him as he turned away.

The chef just stared at his friend. Did he just mishear him? He couldn't have just heard Usopp say that he was not going to bother helping a woman who was ready to die so that he could live...or did he? He knew that he was still mad at Luffy, but did he truly forswear the entire crew just because of what happened with the Going Merry?

If he did, then Sanji would never forgive him. Family giving up on family was unacceptable.

"This doesn't really have anything to do with me anymore and now the World Government is our enemy? I don't want to be a part of that...and I certainly don't want to face Luffy again! After everything that I said...everything that I did?! How could I possibly sail with you guys again?!" Usopp shouted at them, his eyes determined and his expression solemn. It was that expression that did it for Sanji:

He wasn't bluffing.

"I'm sorry about Robin and Steven, I really am, but this isn't my fight. Let the Gems save the day...I'm going home..." Usopp walked away, descending back down into the train and out of Sanji's sight.

"Goodbye..."

"GOODBYE?! YOU IDIOT, THIS IS A TRAIN! COME BACK HERE! HEY!" Franky tried calling after him, but it was of no use. Usopp was gone and he had made the ultimate call. He was a Straw Hat no more...

"Just let him go..." Sanji bitterly told him. "He made his choice..."

"But what now?!" Franky turned sharply towards the chef.

"Now? Now we make a plan..." Sanji sat down on the train, informing both the state of his clothes and the internal pain he was feeling from Usopp's declaration. It just didn't feel right to the chef.

How could a person like Usopp just give up on his friends? He had traveled with them for months and have shared experiences people only dream about. The pirate had fought Fishmen, a mole-woman, and had even joined the crew in facing a literal god. He was prepared to put his life on the line time and time again...why would he abandon them now? Was he really that petty all of this time? Had Sanji just been blind to it?

As Sanji and Franky began to discuss just how to reach the front car where Robin (and probably Steven) were stationed, an unexpected guest made their presence known. It was a Marine wearing familiar sunglasses...but Sanji couldn't picture just why a Marine would be familiar to him. Either way, he had just opened up the next car door and started to peer his head around.

"I swear I thought I heard their voices yelling out here!" the familiar Marine yelled inside of the car. "If it's who I think it is, then we..."

The Marine locked eyes with Sanji and Franky, slipping to the ground as he did so. Sanji's face immediately fell as he realized, familiar or not, the gig was up. "Shit..."

"HOLY CRAP! HOW...HOW DID YOU GET HERE?!" the Marine asked as he tried to get up, falling down a second time in shock back toward the door.

"How did...?" Sanji repeated, narrowing his eyes as he studied the Marine from a distance. It was almost as if he was relieved to see Sanji...but why would a Marine be relieved to see a pirate who didn't (unjustly) have a bounty yet?

Then it all clicked together in his head. "No...the shitty bomb-idiot?!"

Before he could answer, a new voice came out of nowhere and surprised all three of them. "**EXPLOSIVE STAR!**" Coming from further down the train, the Marine was shot with an explosive projectile, sending him shooting back inside of the door he came through.

"What the...who did that?!" Sanji whipped around and was greeted by a figure draped in a red cape and wearing a yellow mask with blue stripes. Three prongs jutted outward from it like petals on a flower...and an all-too familiar bandaged long nose stuck out from the center of the mask.

"I've heard the entire situation from that cowardly liar down below," the masked figure explained to them, ignoring the cries of anguish from the car below. "It seems as though you wish to save a young lady and a child from harm's way. I need no cause to lend my aid to you. Let us fight together!"

"Who...who are you?!" Franky asked, not being able to see the long-nosed masked hero from where he was standing.

"I am the bravest warrior on the Grand Line! I am the king of the snipers! *I...AM...SOGEKING!*"

The Crime of Existence

Inside of Captain T-Bone's sea train car, the costumed forms of Petrea and Damian were slumped in their seats. It was clear the two of them were dejected at the mounting realization that what was intended to be an easy escape from Backslide Island was quickly turning into an impossible rescue mission on top of other issues that the duo were barely comprehending.

"CP9...of all the boogeymen that we would be pitted up against; why the hell is it CP9?" Damian groaned, burying his head in his hands while slumping forward.

"It just seems impossible! I mean, I know we have a reputation as infamous assassins, but even we can't stand up to the World Government's secret kill squad!" Petrea cried. "This just isn't fair!"

"Fair or not, we can't just sit idly by. Steven and Robin are counting on us..." Damian propped himself up. "They need us...I don't know what we are going to do, but they need us."

"We can do this...we can do this..." Petrea repeated to herself. "Okay...HOW are we going to do this?"

"The hell if I know," Damian took off his sunglasses, rubbing his eyes as he tried to think in frustration. "Damn it, has a month living in Beach City REALLY made us this useless?!"

"As someone who didn't elect to stay in Beach City, I'd like to point out that I feel helpless too!" Genevieve called from her hiding spot, which she opened for a moment to breathe in some fresh air. Sweat was forming on her brow, which she wiped away before it got into her eyes. "God; why is it...why is it so hot in there?"

"Do you require any assistance?! Are you injured?!" Captain T-Bone jumped up and ran to the young girl, worry etched on his gaunt face.

"I'm fine...unless you have any ideas on how to beat CP9 by ourselves without any of the Monster Trio on this train?" Genevieve asked hopefully.

"Monster Trio?" Captain T-Bone and the former "Mr. 5 Pair" repeated back.

"You know...Luffy, Zoro, and Sanji: the powerhouses of the crew. That's what Usopp started calling them after I joined up and it kind of caught on..." Genevieve explained.

"We've never once heard them be called that," Petrea pointed out as she raised an eyebrow.

"Has there really been an appropriate time since you came back?" the painter countered.

"The name fits...though I'd say the Gems should definitely qualify to fit that group..." Damian trailed off. "That would make them...what? The Insidious Six?"

"The Sinister Six?" Captain T-Bone offered.

"The Powerhouse Six?" another random Marine spoke up.

"I got it: the Monstrous Six!" Genevieve snapped her fingers. "How's that sound?"

At once, murmurs of agreement rang throughout the car. As everyone began to nod, Petrea looked around and nearly had to pick her jaw up from the floor. "WHY THE HELL ARE YOU IDIOTS STILL TALKING ABOUT THIS WHEN WE SHOULD BE FOCUSING ON FIGURING OUT WHAT SUICIDAL PLAN WE ARE GOING TO GO THROUGH!"

The nodding abruptly stopped, leaving the room silent. As they did so, the faint sound of clinking could be heard. All heads slowly looked upwards to the ceiling of the train. "Is...is that footsteps?" Damian asked.

"No. No, it couldn't be...could it?" Petrea gulped.

"Permission to speak freely, friend?" Captain T-Bone asked Genevieve, who nodded. "The idea that anyone would be on the roof of a sea train like this during the Aqua Laguna is quite simply ludicrous. There is no conceivable way that a person could survive

such ferocity..."

"Nobody could...but maybe..." Damian looked out of the window and paused. He waited a moment before he adjusted his Marine uniform and walked towards the door to the car. "I'm going out there."

"What?! Why?!"

"It's simple, Petrea. Nobody could survive the Aqua Laguna, true...but our crew is not just anybody. They would fight tooth and nail to storm this weather. If Casey Ryback could do something like this on both a train and a boat, what's to say that the Straw Hats couldn't do this on a sea train with their eyes closed?"

"What the hell does that stupid movie that you and Dewey watch every week have to do with anything right now?!" Petrea asked.

"What I'm saying is that I think there is somebody on the train!" Damian pointed to the ceiling and motioned for everyone to be quiet as he cracked open a window. Sure enough, one could faintly hear muffled voices from outside despite the howling wind. The sound was nearly impossible to make out, but it was unmistakably that of voices.

"I stand corrected," Captain T-Bone noted. "I apologize for stating my opinion without factoring in a variable like..."

"Captain, it's fine," Genevieve handwaved him, her eyes darting outside. "I don't even...just...just how is this possible?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out!" Damian ran to the car door and opened it up.

"But how can...how can we even be sure that it's them?!" Petrea called to the bomb-man.

"I swear I thought I heard their voices yelling out here!" Damian yelled back before fully stepping outside. "If it's who I think it is, then we..."

Out in the storm, Damian peered his head around to find some kind of an answer. The former "Mr. 5" knew in his heart that his friends

were there to help save the day...they just had to. He knew that even with Captain T-Bone in their pocket, there was no way that the three of them could win against CP9. This was the miracle Damian was praying for. This is the only way he could see them coming out on top.

Amazingly, his prayers were answered. There before his eyes was the unmistakeable form of Sanji. He knew it. He knew that they stood a chance now. He was talking with a second figure that was vaguely familiar but it did not click for several seconds just where he met the blue-haired, speedo-wearing man. In an instant, the hangover he had been ignoring came back in a terrible way, falling to the ground in shock.

"HOLY CRAP! HOW...HOW DID YOU GET HERE?!" Damian asked as he tried to get up, falling down a second time in shock back toward the door.

"How did...?" Sanji repeated, clearly confused about his own presence on the train. "No...the shitty bomb-idiot?!"

Before he could answer, a new voice came out of nowhere and surprised all three of them. **"EXPLOSIVE STAR!"**

In an instant, the hangover that had returned suddenly became trivial as Damian's head began to pound. His body was shot back into the car, clearly caught off-guard by what had to be an explosive. While such devices don't affect him given his Devil Fruit abilities, it still could strike him just the same. The power of the shot caused him to hit the floor with such force that it shook the car. "Ugh..."

"What the hell just happened?!" Petrea jumped back as the smoldering form of Damian twitched. "Are you okay?! Was it them?! Are we found out?!"

"This man has been shot! Quickly, we must dress any wounds he has!" T-Bone shouted, rushing to Damian's side.

"I'm fine...just...just wishing that I didn't drink last night," Damian murmured as he tried to find his bearings.

"I could give two damns if you have a hangover! What. Happened?!" Petrea grabbed him and began to shake him.

"What happened?" I think Usopp just shot me!" the bomb-man groaned. "The hell is even going on today?"

"Usopp is here?! I thought he quit the crew!"

"It sounded like Usopp, but I didn't actually see him. I DID see Sanji and that blue-haired asshole from last night together! Do you know what that means?"

"What?"

"It means we actually have a chance of pulling this off," he grinned. He then got up and knocked on Genevieve's compartment. "Oy, have Captain Crypt-Keeper here keep guard. Petrea, you're with me. Let's try this again!"

Nodding, Petrea and Damian ran to the door and opened it up once more. However, they were met with an odd sound filling the air. The two just stopped and stared at each other in surprise. "Is...is Usopp singing?"

GWMAPT

Outside in the rain, a heroic melody could be heard. It's stirring words carried a sense of inspiration to all who heard it...unfortunately, neither Sanji nor Franky were paying the singing, costumed hero any mind.

"Oh, the wind carries my name from Sniper Island far away. When I take aim, it is straight and true. Lu lu la la lu! Whether you're a man or a mouse: Lock on! I will put your heart in my sights, LOCK ON!"

"So, those shitty idiots are here too? What a small world," Sanji couldn't help but grin, looking down toward where the "Marine" had been shot back into.

"You know that Marine?" Franky asked.

"Yeah. He's a dumbass but I'm glad to see him...if only because that

means the beautiful Petrea-chan is not far behind!" Sanji's eyes quickly turned into hearts before reverting back to normal. "This changes things. We now have at least five of us who can charge into the other train cars and get back the kid and Robin-chan...and him..."

Both men acknowledged the still-singing masked man with the long nose. Oblivious to the rain and focusing all of his might on his melody, his voice continued to ring out loud and true. *"No one knows what secrets hide behind this mask and my cape. Lu lu lu lu lu la la! There is no escape! (Sogeking sniper pa pa) Sogeking aims true!"*

"Is he always like this?" Franky asked.

"I mean, our crew has gotten significantly more musical since the kid joined up with us...but I have absolutely no idea why he's doing this," Sanji admitted.

"He's dealing with a lot of crap. Let's just be mindful of his feelings and move on. Hey!" Franky called to the mysterious stranger. "As nice of a song as this is, get over here already! We've got a rescue to perform, don't we?"

"Oh. Okay," the man known as Sogeking replied, joining the others and stopping his song. "But did any of you have any questions about me since we have never met before? Don't you want to know where Sniper Island is?"

"So, you guys were in the sixth car. We are currently above the fifth car, meaning that there are five cars that the kid and Robin-chan could be in. If I was right about that Marine, I doubt that they would be in the car below us. Logic would suggest that they would be in the topmost car, but logic is usually thrown out of the window this late in the game," Sanji explained, ignoring Sogeking all together. He then pointed to Franky, sizing him up as he did so. "Are you as strong as you look?"

"I'm SUPER strong," Franky corrected him.

"...Sniper Island is in your heart," Sogeking finished to nobody in

particular.

"Good. Listen, our objective is to get them back. We get them both, we win. If we only get one, we lose. This is not going to be easy...we could easily get surrounded by Marines and World Government stooges. Is that a problem for you two?"

"Not at all," Franky grinned, punching his hand as he did so.

"Sogeking laughs in the face of danger!"

"Good enough for me! Now then, let's test my hypothesis and get out of this pouring rain..." Sanji motioned for the group to move to the door below.

Sliding open the train car door immediately caused their hearts to fall. Instead of being greeted by the familiar forms of Petrea, Damian, and Genevieve, it appeared as if they were about to walk into a car full of uniformed Marines. All of them immediately turned their heads to acknowledge the trio, who could merely weakly wave in response.

"Uh...hi?" Sanji called in.

"SANJI!" the familiar voice of Petrea called out from the crowd. The blonde pushed her way forward and leaped into Sanji's arms, practically causing him to nosebleed. "I didn't believe that you were here, but here you are!"

"PETREA-CHAN!"

"Wait..." Franky cocked his head in confusion. "Have we met? Why do I feel like I've met you before?"

"That's because we have, you pompous idiot!" another familiar voice chimed in. Sure enough, it was Damian, whose outfit was still smoking ever so slightly after getting attacked by Sogeking's attack.

The cyborg jumped back in shock. "Hey! You're that guy from last night! What a super coincidence!"

"Yeah!" Damian growled. "How the hell are you so chipper right

now? You tried to drink us out of house and home last night and you're here looking like a million berries!"

"The hell are you talking about? I only drank cola last night. You're the one who kept ordering 'rum and cola, hold the cola' if I recall..."

"AND YOU LET ME KEEP DRINKING THEM!"

"Um...citizens whom I just met...as entertaining as your banter is, why is nobody acknowledging the fact we are in a train full of Marines who are idly standing by?" Sogeking asked, staring around at the others in the car.

"They're with me!" a third voice cried out. From above in a compartment, Genevieve rolled out and fell to the floor. "Ugh...I meant to do that."

"ARE YOU INJURED?!" Captain T-Bone ran over to Genevieve as quick as a flash. The young painter showed him away.

"I'm fine. I...Usopp, what the heck are you wearing?" Genevieve asked while holding back laughter.

"You must have me confused with someone else. I'm Sogeking from Sniper Island! I am the greatest sniper in the world!" Sogeking quickly struck a pose. "Would you like to hear my elaborate backstory?"

"I'll pass..." Genevieve rolled her eyes.

"We have so many questions right now," Petrea blurted out.

"As do we. Why don't we find a nice quiet part of the train as ask away?" Sanji flirted with a wink, causing Petrea to slap him while he was still holding her.

"We don't have time for this! Steven and Robin are being guarded by members of CP9 and we don't know how long the 'Color Trap' is going to last on all of these guys. We need a plan to act decisively and swiftly!" Damian slapped his head in frustration. "What do you guys know?"

"Nothing outside of the fact the crew is trailing us in another sea train. What about you, shitty bomb-idiot?"

"Allow me," Captain T-Bone interjected. "On this train alone, we have five cars remaining. Given the fact that your appearance is a bit roughened, I'll assume Jerry and the others in front have been subdued. There is still Wanze the chief in the next car. He is known for literally using ramen as a weapon."

"Using food in battle? What a waste..." Sanji growled.

"Quite so," T-Bone continued. "The car above was where the youth was being held. He was guarded by the newest members of CP9...I don't know much about them. That leaves two cars remaining. One of which is bound to have your other friend while the other undoubtedly holds the remainder of CP9."

"Thank you, captain. You have been most helpful," Genevieve bowed with effort.

"Robin is probably in the head car...nobody would want their prized hostage to be toward the middle. That means we have a marathon of fighters to go through. What's the best way to handle this?"

The pirates stared at the horde of Marines just standing there, eagerly awaiting Genevieve's orders. The group collectively nodded and looked to the painter. "Hmm...are you sure we want to use this trump card early on? It might be better to hold off and save them for later?"

"You've has these guys subdued for ages now. We don't know if this is going to last...so why not use what we have for now and go from there?" Damian shrugged. "Any objections?"

"I still have questions!" Franky pointed out.

"Piss off."

GWMAPT

"THAT WAS LITERALLY THE COOLEST THING WE HAVE EVER SEEN!" the members of the Franky Family who had left their

houseboat to dry off in the Rocket Man shouted in unison.

From the inside of the Rocket Man, all of the soaking wet members of the group were busy trying to get changed into somewhat dryer clothes, courtesy of Pearl (whose Talisman Of Cloth was assisting the shipwrights and the Franky Family) and Nami (who had gotten clothes for the Straw Hats just in case of a situation like this). Of course, it was nearly impossible not to discuss the monumental feat the group had just accomplished. Of everyone, Zambai, Lulu, and Tilestone were the most in awe of the power the Straw Hats and Gems possessed.

"SERIOUSLY, TEACH US HOW TO BE AS COOL AS YOU!" Zambai begged at Amethyst's feet.

"Ha! A Gem could get used to this..." Amethyst grinned.

"Oy! These pockets in my shorts are too small, Nami!" Luffy called out to his navigator, who was busy getting changed herself in the corner of the car. "How am I supposed to carry any meat in them?!"

"YOU DON'T NEED TO CARRY ANY MEAT INTO BATTLE!" Nami scolded without even turning around.

"Says you..." Luffy pouted before spinning toward Pearl. "Hey, Pearl..."

"Don't even begin to ask me to fulfill such a ludicrous request," Pearl snapped, putting the Talisman of Cloth back into her gemstone. "We must think practically in regards to how we will play this out. Steven and Nico Robin depend on us...this isn't the time to joke around!"

"I never joke about meat," Luffy pointed out.

The Gem sighed and shook her head in defeat. "I know you don't."

"So you'll make it with that thingamajig?!" Luffy's eyes lit up like stars.

"...I'll consider it..."

"Woo-hoo!" Luffy cheered. He looked around at all of the people in

the car and smiled. Everyone here was united in their quest to save their friends and not a single soul would rest until their mission was fulfilled. However, Luffy locked eyes on Greg, who was still looking out of the window in the corner. The captain frowned and ran over to him in excitement, wanting to talk to him regardless. As he did so, he clumsily tripped on the pile of scrap Peridot was fiddling with, landing directly into the former rock star.

"Gah! Don't scare me like that, Luffy! Are you okay? Did you get hurt?" Greg quickly asked, his mind returning to the present situation.

"Nope! Sorry 'bout that! You too, Peridot!" Luffy called to the green Gem, who was too engrossed in her work to respond with anything other than a quick thumbs up. "Say, whatcha doing over here?"

"Me? I'm just trying to see if I can spot the other train. The sooner we find Steven, the sooner I'll be able to breathe," Greg admitted. "I've gotta say, you guys really were amazing out there! We really have a chance now!"

"Greg, we've always had a chance! We'll get them back before you know it!" Luffy smiled and jumped off of him. "Still, how did you do that before?"

"How did I do what?" Greg asked, cracking his neck.

"You know, that thing with the song? That was pretty awesome too!"

"What? Do you mean me singing Elton John? It's just a song that's famous back in our world...that just happened to share a name with this train."

"Not just the song! We could all hear it outside during the rain and it just pumped me up! I just wanted to kick that rain's ass to the beat of that song! It was so...cool!"

"...really?" Greg raised an eyebrow. He was quiet for a moment before his eyes widened. "Would you say that you were fighting to the rhythm of it?"

"I guess? All of those musical names sound the same to me," Luffy

admitted. "Why?"

"No reason...it could be something or it could be nothing..." Greg looked down at his hands in shock before smiling. "Luffy, thank you!"

"For what?"

"For being you!" Greg laughed. "It's your best trait!"

"Shishishishi!" Luffy joined him in laughing, unsure of what Greg was referring to but rolling with it. "I agree!"

The laughing was almost immediately drowned out by the sound of yelling. The two men looked over to a fuming Paulie, who was angrily pointing at Nami. The navigator had finally finished getting changed into battle-ready clothes and Paulie was not happy about her choice in wardrobe.

"HOW DARE YOU JUST CHANGE IN FRONT OF A CAR FULL OF MEN?!" Paulie screamed violently. "DO YOU HAVE NO SHAME AT ALL?!"

"We don't mind," Lulu and Tilestone called over, alternating glanced between Nami (whom they had been secretly spying on from afar) and Amethyst (whom they were still fawning over).

"NOBODY ASKED YOU!" Paulie snapped. "SERIOUSLY, AM I THE ONLY ONE WHO IS OFFENDED BY YOUR REVEALING CLOTHES?! LOOK AT YOUR STOMACH AND THAT SKIRT! BETWEEN YOU, THE SQUARE SISTERS, AND THAT HARLOT PEARL..."

"Harlot?!"" Pearl's cheeks turned bright blue. "What is that supposed to mean?!"

"And where exactly did you want us to change?" Nami frowned, not wanting to feed fuel into the fire.

"ANYWHERE BUT HERE!"

"You're too bashful!" Kiwi commented.

"You're a bashful boy!" Mozu added.

"SHUT UP!"

"You kids are a riot!" Kokoro snorted into her drink, which appeared to have been continuously filled since leaving Water Seven. "I haven't had this much entertainment since Franky and Iceburg were teenagers!"

"As...amusing as all of this is, what's our game plan? Do we have ANY plan besides attacking them and getting the others back?" Pearl asked, ignoring Paulie all together.

"That isn't a plan?" Luffy and Zoro asked in unison.

"NO!" Nami groaned as she leaned on her staff, which was quite different from her original Clima-Tact.

"Hey; that's new, isn't it?" Connie asked after she finished getting changed into her Kalaripayattu outfit that Pearl created for her, walking up to them with Chiminey and Gonbe in tow. "I haven't seen that before."

"And I haven't seen you in that outfit since your duel with Zoro," Nami commented, picking up her staff. "But you're right. Usopp and Peridot were working on it together during the whole Golden Crown affair...Usopp had added some Dials to it before...before..."

"Before he left the crew," Nami and Connie sighed in sadness, sullenness overtaking them. "This was his final masterpiece!"

"Hey!" Peridot's head immediately shot up, discarding an odd pile of metal that she was attempting to wield together. "That was a joint project, thank you very much!"

"This was his last collaborative masterpiece!" Nami and Connie moaned in unison.

"...it's a start..." Peridot's eyes narrowed before she picked up her project once more. "This arm canon is going to need a stronger power source if I am going to get it operational..."

"Want some of this?" Kokoro asked, shaking her bottle. "This has some serious power to it."

"...yes. Yes, I would. Wow; thanks, train-human," Peridot quickly ran toward her and back to her work corner without saying any other word besides giggling to herself. She began to work at a fast pace before she paused. She looked at her pile of scrap and shook her head in frustration. "THIS LIQUID COMPOUND WILL OFFER NO USE TO ME AT ALL! GAH! I NEED A DIFFERENT APPROACH!"

The green Gem looked out of the window and scowled. "Perhaps there is something else that I can make with the materials I possess...perhaps I..." Peridot paused mid-sentence as she spied something outside in the storm. "Uh...fellow pirates? FELLOW PIRATES?! TURN AROUND AND ACKNOWLEDGE ME!"

All eyes were on Peridot as she weakly pointed out the window. "We might have a new variable in the equation that we didn't consider!"

"What the heck are you talking about?" Paulie asked.

"There is a large creature up ahead on the tracks...AND WE ARE ABOUT TO STRIKE IT!" Peridot wailed, her finger jabbing the window with far more ferocity.

"Is that Yokozuna?" Kokoro asked. "Ngagaga! This is turning into quite the day!"

"THIS IS NOT THE TIME TO LAUGH! WE ARE ABOUT TO BE DERAILED!"

GWMAPT

Wanze was a most-happy individual.

As the head waiter and cook of both CP7 and this train, he was eagerly awaiting the next chance to cook and feed his peers. Nobody had really requested anything to eat outside of a small sandwich for the young prisoner, but he eagerly awaited the moment when he would be deemed useful.

Imagine his surprise when a group of random individuals entered his

car. Wanze was so happy that he literally rolled his roller skates up and down the walls. "Hello! I'm Wanze! Mad, Mad Wanze! You guys look hungry! Want some ramen? I know you do!"

Just as Wanze was going to explain just HOW his ramen was made, the car filled up with several Marine officers including the infamous Captain T-Bone. This was unexpected, but not unwelcome. Wanze knew that his powers and his powers alone were the only thing keeping the dangerous hostages aboard the train. However, help was always appreciated. The man did not believe in the expression "too many cooks on the kitchen."

"Captain, would you and your men help us out here?" a teenage girl asked Captain T-Bone, who now gripped his sword.

"With pleasure, my dear," the captain nodded. His face momentarily looked like it was in pain, but that instant passed rather quickly.

"Right-Angle Flash...Bone Soir!"

Cutting a giant rectangular angle in the air and then slicing down, Captain T-Bone launched his attack directly at Wanze. The CP7 agent barely had time to comprehend what was happening before the attack struck him. The legendary "Ship Cutter" himself had somehow or another betrayed the Marines and joined forces with the enemies of the World Government. It made no sense that a former knight would forswear his liege in a time of need.

In the end, it did not matter. He was given no time to get his ingredients prepared to defend himself using his patented Ramen Kenpo. He knew he was a goner the second that the blow hit his chest...

"Hey...I'm alive?" Wanze spoke a few moments later. His body ached in several different ways, but the fact of the matter was that he could still fight.

"Have these guys stay here and watch him...he shouldn't wake up after this, but I'd rather not have to deal with him again..." the blond commented to the girl.

"Good idea. I'll stay too just in case so I can hold down the reserves

and watch over our cash. Give 'em hell and yell if you need us. It might be a good idea to use that whole 'trump card' thing after all," the girl saluted.

"Wait...what?" Wanze asked, confused by what he meant. The blond man glanced over at him and made his move.

"PLASTIC SURGERY SHOT!"

The last thing he saw before blacking out was five members of the group calmly leaving his kitchen and a black shoe belonging to a blond man kicking him square in the face, which felt odd and different despite now feeling numb.

GWMAPT

Steven shifted around uncomfortably in his chair. He was still accompanied by his three captors and was even given some food to eat, but the entire situation unnerved him. His captors had forced him to stop talking and acknowledging them until they made it to their destination and, truthfully, Steven did not feel like saying anything to them. He focused on what he knew in his mind: Robin was a captive on this train, the Baroque Works trio was hidden and waiting to save them both, and he was surrounded by World Government assassins who could kill him and his friends in a moment if he said the wrong thing. The youth did not want anyone to get hurt or even to engage in any kind of violence. He just wanted to be back with his family and friends...was that so hard?

"Did you hear that?" Nero asked, his nose twitching as he picked up his head, breaking the haunting silence.

It was true. Steven had heard a loud bang coming from the next car. It was hard to hear given the rain, but there was unmistakably a sound. He looked to Apollo, who continued to smoke his pipe and read a novel in disinterest. He had positioned himself right next to Steven while Heca was on the other side, staring out of the window. "I did. You do realize that imbecilic chef tends to make a great deal of noise when cooking, don't you?"

"I don't know...something seems off. I'm going to go check it out...I

could use something to do besides babysitting," Nero told him as he shot a glance over to Steven, who looked away and pretended not to listen to their conversation.

"Just don't kill him," Apollo flashed him a glance. "I know your proclivity for murder, but now isn't the time and he isn't worth the paperwork."

"I don't think anyone would miss him...I could see to that," Heca grinned maliciously.

"There will be none of that. If we are to be full members of CP9, we need to know when the proper time and place for such behaviors are...and now isn't one of them."

The weasel-looking man sighed in defeat. "...it's not the time for fiddling and it's not the time for killing. Director Spandam better have a good mission for us to do after this assignment..."

As Nero opened the door, he found himself face to face with a large group of people, particularly a familiar blue-haired man with a metal nose and sunglasses. Nero jumped back like a cat to assess the situation and to defend himself. However, Steven could easily see the bloodlust in his eyes and the desire for murder written all over his body.

But that didn't matter, because he recognized the people accompanying the blue-haired man almost instantly. "GUYS!" Steven shouted with joy.

"Oh? Members of the Straw Hats here to rescue Nico Robin and Mr. Universe, I presume? I see you have already managed to free the shipwright's former apprentice," Apollo gave a curt wave from his chair, putting his book down and taking a puff from his pipe. "I must say, my partner was just saying how quiet this trip had gotten. I suppose that is about to change."

"I suppose so," Sanji lit another cigarette. "I'm going to assume you aren't just going to let us walk through to get Robin-chan?"

"You'd be correct," Apollo commented, ignoring his partner, who was

twitching in anticipation to begin his assault on the odd man. "Although, I have to express my amazement that you managed to infiltrate a moving sea train. Clearly you were on it when you boarded, but even the best plans can be derailed at the last moment."

Damian began to laugh to himself before getting hit in the ribs by his former partner. "Sorry...it was the train pun..."

"Ah. That was unintentional. However..." Apollo began to say before Nero screamed in the air, cutting him off completely.

"I CAN'T TAKE THIS ANY MORE! THAT ONE IS MINE!" Nero roared as he leapt toward the blue-haired guy, who saw the attack coming and punched him hard into the air, sending him through the roof of the car.

"If you excuse me, guys," blue hair grinned. "I'm going to go check on our pest problem. Be right back."

He went to follow after Nero but was almost blocked by Apollo, who quickly moved away from his seat to intercept him. However, Petrea reached him first and kicked his captor squarely in the face. The mink was momentarily knocked backwards before regaining his momentum, giving the odd-guy all of the time he needed to get to the roof. Apollo appeared to have magically teleported himself into the air and behind Petrea, who ducked just in time before he landed an attack on her.

In the midst of the confusion, Steven saw a mysterious masked individual slip back out of the door they came in from. The presence of such a character confused Steven, but it mattered little. If Sanji has enlisted the aid of a superhero, then he knew that this battle was won. Now he just needed to figure out how to get out of this without anyone else getting hurt.

He went to move but found himself held back by Eirney, who merely shook her head. "Don't even think about it." She then gave him a sadistic looking grin and patted his head. "You're going to stay right here and watch..."

"Actually, I'd say he's coming with me," Damian interjected with an explosive punch. **"Bomb-Breath Punch!"**

The young woman was knocked completely into the wall of the car, the wreckage almost enough to break through to the outside.

Damian, taking no chances, quickly ran to grab Steven. However, Steven realized that he had forgotten about one major thing:

"Damian! Watch out for my cuffs! They are made of that Anti-Devil Fruit rock!"

The second Damian grabbed the boy, it was apparent that his warning was too late. It might not be enough to slow him down completely, but it was clear that Damian was noticeably more sluggish in his determination. "I've...I've got this kid. Eat your heart out, Ryback."

"What?"

"Forget...Forget it," Damian brushed it off. "Come on, before she..."

"Ow...I forgot to dodge," Heca groaned as she pulled herself from the wall. "I hate when I do that."

"WHO FORGETS TO DODGE?!" Damian shouted. As he said that, he was instantly blindsided by the now-limp form of Petrea, who was tossed aside by Apollo. Still weak from the Seastone and the over exhaustion from the day's events, Damian found himself struggling to stay conscious.

"I guess you do, silly," Heca giggled, stepping down on Damian's chest as she grabbed his face. "Why don't you let me see what else you have forgotten?"

"Eirney," Apollo sharply told her, grabbing Steven and putting back in his chair. The mink kept one hand on the boy, holding him in place. "That's enough."

"But, Apollo..." she pouted.

"No. Mr. Universe, I'm sorry you had to see that," Apollo bowed before stopping himself. "...I am right in assuming that both of these were a part of your crew as well?"

The half-Gem was going to point out how they, like him, were Straw Hats for life, but not full time members given the obligations of his home dimension. However, he stopped himself out of fear for his friend's lives. He quickly nodded, which was enough for Apollo to see.

"What did I tell you earlier?" Apollo frowned at his female companion.

"That Lucci told us not to kill the Straw Hats..." she sighed.

"And what were you about to do?"

"...eventually kill that one..." Eirney folded her arms in a dramatic manner. "You're such a party pooper, did you know that?"

"As much as I share your appreciation for bloodlust, this is not the time to do so. What would the director say...or worse, Lucci?"

Puffing out her cheeks in disappointment, Eirney got off of the bomb-man and kicked him into the other door. Steven watched in horror as Damian struggled to get up. He was hacking and wheezing in pain while Petrea laid motionless on the floor beside him. Steven desperately tried to get away from his captors to try to help them, but Apollo kept him from moving. Truly he felt hopeless.

It was then that both the members of CP9 and Steven collectively realized something. The blue-haired guy was fighting Nero, the superhero had slipped away, Genevieve was...somewhere, but one person was missing.

Where had Sanji gone?

GWMAPT

The front car of the Puffing Tom was a rather desolate place. Despite its lavish looks, it was completely devoid of life...or meaningful life, if one were to ask the lone occupant of the car. A cloaked Nico Robin stared out the window aimlessly, ready and willing to accept her fate on behalf of her friends. She had willingly surrendered herself to CP9 and agreed to be the fall-woman for their attempted murder of Iceburg so that her crew could survive...so they

would never know of the horrors that plagued the former island of Ohara.

However, she was not as content with her choice as she was when she had entered the train. The presence of Steven truly unnerved her as it made no sense. Why was he on this train? What would CP9 want with him? She had begged Rob Lucci to let him go, but he refused to acknowledge the request, citing his technical role as being only a "part-time" member of the Straw Hats as being justification enough to bring him along without breaking the terms of their agreement. As such, she had told herself that she would plead her case to the director of CP9 upon arrival at the Gates of Justice, arguing that he was a Straw Hat regardless of his status as "part-time" and, as such, should not have been captured as per their bargain. The whole reason why she gave herself up was so that she could be sure that the Straw Hats would sail away from Water Seven alive...

Their lives had meaning. Her's did not. Peridot would survive without her, Luffy would become the Pirate King without her...what more needed to be said?

Lost in thought, Robin did not think anything was initially amiss when she saw a face in the window that was not a reflection of her own. Momentarily taken back, Robin examined the face and realized it was a mask similar to the one's worn by CP9 and herself during the assassination attempt. It reminded her of a lion or a sun, but the standout feature was the hole in the center. It was currently filled by a long nose...a very familiar long nose.

"Mr. Long-Nose?!" Robin whispered in shock.

The masked-man opened up the window and made his way into the car. He ignored the water dripping from his body and took a seat in front of her. "Greetings, citizen! My name is Sogeking. I'm the king of the snipers!"

Robin did not understand what Usopp was doing dressing up like a superhero vigilante, but she had no time for it. The last thing she wanted was for him to mess everything up. "How...how did you get here?"

"That's a long story. However, I have been filled in on your tale and I have come to rescue you and that boy in the other compartment. Thankfully, I am not alone on my journey. On this train right now, Sanji and a thug named Franky are fighting alongside Petrea, Damian, and Genevieve to get you out of here. I have also heard that the wanted criminal known as 'Straw Hat' Luffy is on his way as well," "Sogeking" explained. "As I managed to scale the train, I got a glimpse at those scary characters in the next train...what a rough-looking lot. Thankfully, I have a plan!"

The masked-man took out a pair of small octopuses. Robin recognized them immediately as octoshoes, which were domesticated octopuses that were the size of an average human's hand. They had the ability to act like a suction cup and were probably the reason how Usopp managed to get to the train car unnoticed. "Listen, put these on. We can get to the last car and nobody would ever know. We'll cut it after Steven is found by the others and..."

"Wait. I'm not going anywhere!" Robin corrected him. "This is what I want. I don't want to go back to Luffy and I don't want to see Steven or the others again. Just get him out of here and leave me be!"

"Still trying to deny it, I see?" Usopp laughed. "We heard all about your story. Apparently it was all cleared up by that Iceburg character from Water Seven...you don't need to fight it anymore."

"Iceburg...he's alive?" Robin gasped. "I...it doesn't matter. I'm not returning with you..."

"Why not?! The Straw Hats can handle themselves! They don't care what the World Government throws at them...they just want to be a family again! Don't you get how Luffy even works?! He knows that you are trying to sacrifice yourself! Did you really think he was going to sit by and let you do that? Did you really think he wouldn't hound your captors to their graves if they harmed a single hair on your head?!"

"YOU DON'T GET IT! I DON'T WANT TO BE SAVED! STOP BEING INCONSIDERATE AND JUST LET ME DI..." Robin began to yell before a knock was heard on the other car. Her heart sank. If she

was caught with Usopp, it would ruin her chances of saving Steven and letting the crew leave this alive. She needed a plan and she thought of one quick.

"Nico Robin? What's going on?" the voice of Corgi shouted.

Thinking quickly, she hid Usopp under her cloak and hoped that the man would not question why her arms has mysteriously become bandages or why her hood was up. Amazingly, he did not verbally express it, although his face had suspicion written all over it. As such, she prepared herself for the ruse to be exposed...before Usopp quickly knocked him out with a surprise punch.

"Now's our chance! Come on! Let's go!" the masked-Usopp shouted to Robin. He went to open up the window to begin their unwanted escape before the pair began to hear loud noises coming from the next car over. "Oh crap. Those other guys are probably starting to notice what's happening. Listen; it's now or never! Let's..."

Before he could finish his sentence, Robin merely got up and went to open the door to the connecting car. Ignoring Usopp's protests, Robin knew what needed to be done. This was not the time for fighting or arguing; this was the time to accept the inevitability of death...a meaningful death for a worthless individual.

She peered into the door and saw the regular collection of people whom she expected to see: Blueno, Kalifa, Kaku, and Rob Lucci. However, she was not expecting to see Sanji there as well. It appeared as if they were in the middle of a deep conversation. Momentarily curious, she listened in on what they were saying.

"Don't you think that she should be killed for the sake of humanity?" Lucci was explaining. "I'm telling you this so you can understand. She might be an actual criminal now, but she started off as a terrible girl with a terrible power. Her mere existence is a crime! This is why she has to die. Thankfully, she's doing so before it would be too late..."

"SHUT YOUR MOUTH!" Sanji roared, attempting to kick him in the face before finding his kick getting blocked.

'They'll kill him,' Robin thought to herself. 'I have to stop this...'

Ignoring Usopp's warnings, Robin opened the door and stared Sanji down. The chef's face lit up when he saw her. "Robin-chan! Are you okay?! Did they hurt you?! Give me a few minutes and I'll take you to safety. Long-nose can grab the others and we'll be home free!"

Having enough of the chef's worthless hopes and Usopp's persistent begging, Robin used her Devil Fruit abilities to create several hands and threw "Sogeking" directly into Sanji. "Why won't you people understand that I am through with you?! Do I need to spell it out for you?!"

Rob Lucci let out a laugh, clearly pleased with this turn of events. It seemed fortuitous that the main members of CP9 were here to witness her dismissal of her crew. Doing this might give her the leverage that she needed to make sure that Steven could leave unharmed. It was a long shot, but it was the last bit of hope Robin held onto.

Of course, just as Robin clutched onto a small amount of hope, it quickly died as the door to the car flew open to reveal two of the three other members of CP9 that she was not introduced to properly. Specifically, it was the talking gorilla and the other woman. Their presence was not the cause, but rather the sight of the car that they had come from. Steven was left alone in the car, bound by the Seastone cuffs that were no-doubt affecting the other members (whom Robin guessed had eaten Devil Fruits). The youth was not truly alone. On the floor of the car was two familiar faces: Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine, who had somehow acquired Marine uniforms. How they had managed to arrive on this train was beyond her comprehension, but they looked like they were barely clinging onto life.

Truly CP9 was attempting to keep their word by keeping the Straw Hats alive.

"Mr. Lucci, we seemed to have lost a stowaway on the train and...and it appears as if you had found him...or I suppose 'found them' would be the appropriate phrase," the gorilla commented as he walked in, his body language barely showing that he had just

fought either of the two premier Officer Agents of Baroque Works.

"Shit," Sanji commented, turning around in horror.

"SANJI! ROBIN!" Steven yelled from the other car, clearly afraid to leave the duo in their condition.

"What happened there?" Kaku asked. "Why did you attack the soldiers assigned to escort us?"

"They were members of the Straw Hat pirates who happened to have infiltrated the ranks of the assigned guard," the gorilla explained, looking to Lucci and gauging his reaction.

The man in question frowned and walked past Sanji and Usopp, making himself directly next to the two newest members of CP9. He glared at them both and then back to the fallen duo. "Clearly they were here before we left Water Seven, but did you kill them?"

"No, sir."

"Are. You. Sure?" Lucci asked one final time, his eyes clearly flaring despite his calm expression.

"He wouldn't let me," the woman pouted. "Can I do it? Please?"

In an instant, Lucci grabbed the woman's throat and tightened his grip around it. "Need I remind you that we made a promise to let them leave alive? The only reason you are even breathing right now is due to your family's connection with CP9. Legacy or not, I will not tolerate rashness like this in this outfit. Do you understand me?"

Nodding quickly, the woman was let go. She gasped for air and was held steady by the gorilla, who shot his own angry look at Lucci. He continued to walk into the adjacent car without even acknowledging Steven. He stopped and bent down where the forms of Damian and Petrea laid out and examined Petrea's uniform. "These are uniforms from Captain T-Bone's division. His reputation is legendary...there would be no way that he would not notice two stowaways. He's not that incompetent."

As Lucci looked over the two of them, Robin spied Usopp trying to

get up off of the floor. She was about to pin him down when she noticed the ceiling getting pounded right above where he was laying. Thinking quickly, Robin shoved him out of the way just as the third and final member of new recruits to CP9 was pounded into the floor by a mysterious man from the roof. Robin did not recognize the other man but could deduce that his presence was not a surprise like Sanji's was to the members of CP9, leading Robin to believe that he was another prisoner brought from Water Seven.

"That was a SUPER entrance, eh?" the man struck a pose, his gigantic arms coming together to join the two star tattoos on his forearms as one united star. With nobody responding to his self-adoring entrance, he peered around to try to read the room. Based on the expression on his face, he was not pleased. "Jeez. I turn around for one minute to fight this weasel and you guys let the whole plan go to hell? Amateurs!"

Lucci, dropping the chocolatier, got up to meet the odd man. His eyes darted to the floor where the other agent lied and he shook his head. "I forgot about this newbie...who is he again?"

"He's Nero," the gorilla replied instantly. "He's my partner."

"Corgi mentioned that he only mastered four out of the six forms of Rokushiki...and unlike our other two new recruits, has not eaten a Devil Fruit," Kaku added.

"I see," Lucci noted, his attention fully on the wounded man named Nero. His face was bloody and bruised, but he was still attempting to get up off of the floor.

"Da-Damn it," he groaned. "I'm better than...better than this! You got lucky, you cyborg-asshole! I'll kill you for this, orders be damned!"

"Hey," Lucci called to him in a neutral voice. "What do you think you are doing?"

"Mr. Lucci!" Nero coughed, finally getting to his feet. "He got the better of me...but it's okay! Let me just ki-kill this guy real quick and I'll help with the others here!"

"Are you an idiot? You are letting your emotions blind you. Franky nor any of these people are to be killed and..." Lucci stopped himself mid-sentence and closed his eyes. "Never mind. Forget all of that. I'm giving you three seconds to run. Three."

Nero blinked in confusion, unsure of what was just spoken. Robin had understood what Lucci was doing almost instantly: killing off the weak links in an otherwise fortified organization. "What?"

"Two."

"Wait...you're just kidding, right?" Nero tried one final time.

"One."

"DON'T HURT HIM!" Steven cried out, tears dripping down his face.

Wasting no time, Nero attempted to run as fast as he could out of Lucci's reach, but he was not fast enough. Lucci had a clear shot to strike him with his bare hands and would have done so, if not for the speedy intervention of the gorilla. He brought up his arms to block his partner, managing to take Lucci's attack without succumbing to its power. Robin could swear that the arm that was blocking the attack had turned a darker shade of black, but it might have just been a trick of the light. In the end, Rob Lucci was furious.

"Stand down," Lucci warned him. "This vermin is getting an appropriate and fair severance for his time in CP9. A work in progress has no place here."

"Weren't you a work in progress at one time? Aren't we all works in progress? He might not have Devil Fruit powers and he might not have all of Rokushiki under his belt like you four have, but I implore you to give him one final chance. Think about it! We need all of the people we can get in case the Straw Hats try something again! Look at the complexity of their plan to sneak on-board this train! Look at all they have accomplished since leaving the East Blue! The director asked us to learn from you and assist you for a reason. I ask you to at least wait until the prisoner is delivered to the Gorosei before taking action."

The smallest traces of anger appeared on Lucci's face before a second person spoke up. "Lucci, the rookie has a point. We could use all the bodies we could get to slow them down if they attempted another move. We already know that the soldiers won't stop them; at least they'll slow them down. If anything, let Spandam make the call before you kill him," Kaku added, walking to his companion.

"All of you are too soft and weak," Lucci muttered before quickly jabbing Nero and the gorilla in the chest, knocking out Nero and causing the other one to gasp, not using his muscle condensing abilities in time. "Consider this bought time for both of you. If you want to further live, get out of my sight until we get back to Enies Lobby. When this is over, you won't be answering to Spandam or anyone else...only to me."

Pulling himself together, the gorilla shot a venomous look at his superior and nodded. He picked up his companion and moved to the car where Robin had originally housed herself. Robin could see that Lucci was internally furious at the idea of letting somebody so "weak" live, but he directed his attention back to the Straw Hats and the blue-haired man.

"Nico Robin has made her choice, pirates. She has chosen to accept the fact that her existence is a crime and is ready to accept the consequences. This is your only chance to walk away from this without suffering any more injuries. Forswear the prisoners and walk away...or face us and get sent away as close to death as I can provide."

Robin knew immediately that her former friends would not listen to reason and prepared to beg to them one final time to leave her alone. Before she could do that, something caught her eye. The door connecting Steven's car and the kitchen opened up and revealed the smiling form of Miss Goldenweek, who was holding Connie Maheswaran's bag. The sight of her was not surprising, as she was traveling with her companions and had yet to make an appearance on the train, but why was she smiling?

"Um...is this a bad time?" Genevieve waved.

"ANOTHER Straw Hat?" Blueno asked. "How many of them are on

this train?"

The girl looked down at her friends and frowned before adopting the smile from before. "Yeah...it's a bad time, isn't it?"

In a second, she stepped aside and Robin watched as several armed Marines flooded from the kitchen and surrounded the group. One of them looked like a walking corpse, clearly the famous Captain T-Bone. She then saw Genevieve do something to the car she came from, quickly becoming apparent that she actually detached the other cars from the train. The entire scenario confused Robin immensely until the archaeologist began to put the pieces together in her mind. 'Miss Painter...did she use her color hypnosis on the entire division? Could she even do that?'

"Perfect timing! Come on! Sanji, get into that car with Steven and Genevieve! Franky, cut the car loose!" Usopp shouted, grabbing Robin as quickly as he could.

"What are you...?!" Robin was taken back by the sniper's actions, underestimating his speed and agility.

"Do not let them escape with the prisoners!" Lucci told Blueno.

"Understood," he nodded.

"SOGEKING SMOKE STAR!" Usopp cried as he threw one of his patented smoke pellets in the car. The small compartment began to fill up with smoke as the Straw Hats quickly filled up into one car. In an instant, the third car was cut loose from the train itself, free to remain behind while the Puffing Tom sped forward toward its destination.

"THAT WAS SO COOL!" Steven shouted in excitement. "YOU DID IT...uh, wait, who are you?"

"My name is Sogeking, young man!" Usopp placed Robin down and struck a pose. "I am the king of the snipers!"

"Wow!" Steven's eyes lit up like stars before they fell back to the fallen forms of Petrea and Damian, who were being looked at by Genevieve "Oh no! Maybe I can try my healing spit? It could work,

right?"

"What the heck are you talking about kid?" Franky asked.

"Good work on using a smoke pellet. It was so lame that nobody would have thought to use it," Sanji sighed and patted Usopp on the back.

"This is great, isn't it? Sure; they need medical attention and we need to figure out just how to take off Steven's handcuffs, but we escaped without having to fight the World Government!" Usopp cheered.

"Don't underestimate these guys. They have weird powers and won't give up this easily. Until we have distance between us and them, I wouldn't celebrate," Franky frowned.

As he said that, a thorny whip latched itself onto the train car. Robin knew right away that Kalifa was pulling the two cars back together. Despite Sanji's best efforts to cut the rope, the train car soon found itself back to where they started. Even worse was that the floor was now littered with unconscious Marines, including Captain T-Bone. The morale in the car instantly dropped as Robin hoped this would be the push the others needed to realize she wasn't worth it.

"SOGEKING, GUARD THEM WITH YOUR LIFE!" Sanji commanded as he jumped to kick Blueno in the face.

"**Iron Body**," he muttered. Before Sanji could land his blow, Blueno struck him in the face, knocking him backwards.

"His hand...why is it so strong?" Sanji asked before switching techniques. He twirled around and actually connected his blow on Blueno's knock, causing his head to move ever-so slightly. "**CON-CASSER CRUSH!**"

"He nearly caused Blueno to drop his 'Iron Body!'" Kaku whispered. He then directed his voice at Blueno. "Be careful! He might not have a bounty, but he's probably one of their best fighters!"

'That's it. This ends now,' Robin told herself. Sprouting eight arms from the ground and in Usopp's back, Robin proceeded to nearly

break Usopp's spine. She took no joy in it, but needed to prove her point.

She was not worth it.

"ROBIN?!" Sanji, Steven, and Genevieve cried out in unison, with Sanji adding his customary "chan" at the end.

"Why are you doing this?!" Steven shouted.

"How many tones do I have to tell you to leave me alone?!" Robin snapped. "Get out of here and let me be!"

From the corner of her eye, she spotted Genevieve tapping her rosy cheeks. It was not something that she was known for doing when in a serious fight like this. The fact that she was not carrying her paintbrush also concerned her. Robin was convinced that it was in the bag the painter was holding, but it mattered little. Just as she did with Usopp, Robin wasted no time in stopping Genevieve before she hypnotized her into wishing to escape. The painter hit the floor almost instantly, leaving only Sanji's and the man named Franky left.

"Well, you really are blowing our one chance at escape aren't you?" Franky told them. "Guess I'm just going to have to even the odds!"

In an unexpected move, Franky rammed the wall of the car they were in as hard as he could. It separated from the car and slammed itself into the car, freeing the third car from the train at last.

"YOU GUYS GET BACK TO WATER SEVEN! THIS IS ONE CYBORG WHO'S GOT A SUPER PLAN!" he shouted from the other car as it began to move out of sight.

Robin was momentarily shocked at the turn of events, but then she quickly remembered why she had lost hope in the first place. Regardless, she knew what she had to do. "WHY WOULD YOU DO THIS?! I DON'T WANT TO ESCAPE!"

"Why?! Why won't you come with us?! What has gotten you so afraid, Robin-chan?!" Sanji asked.

"It's the Buster Call," the form of Blueno responded, creating one of

his air doors right behind Sanji.

In a flash, Blueno quickly incapacitated Sanji and Usopp using his abilities. Both were battered and bruised, but still had the strength to get to their knees. Having enough of the bloodshed, Robin turned to her captor. "I didn't ask for this! I'm not trying to escape!" Robin frantically told Blueno.

"We know. They are the ones who keep attacking me," Blueno countered.

"Then let's get out of here...but please. Please leave the boy. You know and I know that him being here is against our agreement," Robin pleaded one final time.

"Wait!" Steven suddenly shouted. He looked terrified, the poor boy. But something about him was oddly calm and decided. "It's okay! I'm...I'm fine with going."

"No! Steven, you don't understand! I made an agreement and I can get you out of this! I can..." Robin stammered, the last trace of emotions she still had gushing from her at once.

"Robin, I love you! You're family to me...and family means not doing anything alone," Steven smiled his optimistic smile. "I won't fight going back to the train, Mr. Blueno. Just let my friends go."

"That's what I wanted to do in the first place," Blueno nodded. "It's not like you were going to be let go, but I appreciate the lack of resistance. Come on."

The "Devil Child of Ohara" stood there stunned. She couldn't muster a response to the young boy from another world. She had not had somebody tell her that she was loved in nearly twenty years. She knew that Steven was a loving person who could truly look past the flaws of others, but how could he look at someone like her and feel an emotion like familial love? He had barely known her...it didn't make sense...

Why was he sacrificing any potential chance that he could get to stay with her? Why were any of them still chasing after a lost cause?

Couldn't they see that she was worthless? Couldn't they see that their lives were more important?

Couldn't they see that she wanted to die?

"Steven!" Usopp called out weakly from the floor. "Robin!"

"Mr. Sogeking, if you see my captain, tell him I'm okay and to sleep it off. Forget about us and go look for that kingdom of meat...and if not him, then somebody can take the dream for him!" Steven called to him with a wink. "This is how it has to be!"

The sniper was silent for a moment, but quickly nodded. He then turned to Robin, ignoring the blood dripping down his face.

"Fine...but Robin! Listen to me. I know you...you are still hiding something! But you ca-can't leave the crew without Luffy's permission."

In that moment, Usopp and Robin locked eyes. She did not even need to see his real eyes to know that they were staring into her soul. "*Believe in Luffy!*"

As the words permeated in her brain, Robin found herself on autopilot. She watched Blueno attack Usopp and escorted herself through the door with Steven by her side. She could not bring herself to look down at him in the fear that she would turn around. Robin could faintly hear Blueno and Sanji having one final conversation, but her mind kept shifting between the two sentences.

"It's no use. She will never break our agreement. Even if the boy had resisted, she still would do what we asked her to do," Blueno was saying.

'I love you, Robin.'

"What makes you so certain?!" Sanji panted, never giving up hope.

'Believe in Luffy.'

"A long time ago, the Marines initiated a Buster Call on a certain island...one that left no survivors except for a young Nico Robin. The memories of the Marine's might have been etched into her brain.

The Buster Call is the never ending nightmare...it is her childhood trauma personified," Blueno explained in a calm, neutral voice. "Since her nightmare is now being pointed at her companions, she has no will left to oppose us."

'I love you, Robin!'

"You...you knew all of that this whole time?!" Sanji spat venomously.

'Believe in Luffy!'

"Why wouldn't we?"

'I LOVE YOU, ROBIN!'

"IS THERE NO LIMIT TO YOUR DEPRAVITY, YOU SHITTY SCUMBAG?!"

'BELIVE IN LUFFY!'

"Everything we do, we do in the name of Justice. We deeply sympathize with her, but we do what needs to be done," Blueno told Sanji.

As Blueno closed the door he created, Robin knew that the last fleeting chances she had of getting Steven out of this alive went with it. She was truly prepared to die and it was something that she had been wanting since this ordeal began, but something new now gnawed at her soul. There was a hole in her dead heart that was not there earlier in the morning...a hole she never knew she wanted.

She soon found herself back in the first car with Steven and Franky all seated together. They were guarded by Apollo (who was busy trying to remove the "Color Trap" marks from the incapacitated Captain T-Bone and his men) and Nero (who had finally woken up and was tending to his own wounds). She had listened to the cyborg explain just why he was present with them and had the pleasure to inform him (indiscreetly, as not to inform the CP9 agents of the news in case they believed him to be dead) that Iceburg was still alive.

"Eh. It's whatever," Franky continued, trying not to look overjoyed at the news and looking out into the distance. "You know, them having

the three of us is clearly a big deal and they know it. I have the map to one of the ancient weapons, you can activate one that already exists, and the kid...has a weird rock on his stomach."

"I'm a half-alien from another dimension," Steven explained, trying to remain optimistic. He smiled at Robin, who refused to acknowledge it. She truly wanted him to stop showing her affection. She didn't deserve it. She didn't deserve his kindness.

At the same time, Robin heard Apollo and Nero laugh. While they had been keeping their voices down regardless, this was confirmation that they were eavesdropping to some extent.

"...okay; sure. We'll roll with that," Franky shrugged and moved on. "The fact is really that once the World Government has their hands on the weapons or whatever stuff your 'dimension' has to offer, they'll be unstoppable. Sure, they'll claim to stop this age of piracy, but they won't stop there. They'll destroy our world and everything in it..."

"How misinformed," Apollo muttered to himself, allowing the trio to have one last conversation before they met their fate.

"Stay out of this, monkey-man!" Franky barked.

"But that's your government!" Steven gasped. "They look out for the people here! That's what governments do, right?"

"Not this government, kid. Not at all. That's why we are all a threat to those clowns over there. In the end, all three of us need to get out of here together before they pry what they want to know out of us...even you, Nico Robin."

Robin was prepared for this comment and tried not to show the pain she was feeling. However, Steven's presence was making it increasingly harder to do. "I can't...I can't leave. I'll hurt them..."

"No!" Steven stood up and moved toward her, trying to avoid touching her with the Seastone shackles. "Robin, listen to me! You are hurting us by trying to stay away! You can't just sacrifice yourself like this...in the end, the others would rather be with you and face

that Buster Call than go on without you!"

"Didn't you sacrifice yourself? Didn't you ignore me when I told you to go?!" Robin finally said what was on her mind. She didn't want to be so angry, but how else could she express her frustration with him.

Then Steven smiled.

"I believe in Luffy and the others, and they believe in me...and we all believe in you," Steven told her. "I didn't fight it because I wanted to tell you that...and I'll keep telling you that until you believe it."

"The kid's right. Who cares what you are telling yourself. If all of those Straw Hats believe in you, clearly you are doing something right. These World Government assholes can shove their attitude up their assholes. It doesn't matter what happened in the past or what weapon they want you to awaken for them. What matters is you. What matters is your existence. It's okay to be you...it's okay to exist. Existence is not a crime!"

"I think this conversation has gone on long enough," Apollo interjected, moving away from Captain T-Bone and walking toward them. "Now is hardly the time for you to discuss your foolish perceptions of how you believe our government works. All you need to know is that everything that is about to happen is being done in the name of Justice...in the name of preserving the peace in the world. We are about to arrive at the nightless island...Enies Lobby is within our sight. Get ready to meet the director."

As they prepared to exit the train, Robin continued to replay Steven's, Usopp's and now Franky's statements in her head. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't shake them. They just kept replaying in her mind, even as she exited the train and walked through the gates of Enies Lobby. With every step she took, she could hear them as clear as day:

"I love you, Robin!"

"Believe in Luffy!"

"Existence is not a crime!"

The Call on the Private Line

Author's Note: Happy Holidays, everybody! I hope everyone is enjoying this time of year. I think now is as good of time as any to enjoy a new, exciting chapter of our story, don't you? I actually want to take a moment to give a shout out to **King of Fans, who for the past week has been reading both stories and commenting as they have went along. It has been great to read your thoughts, as it is whenever anyone leaves a review on the story. Thank you to all of you who do so; it keeps me motivated.*

*As usual, be sure to check out the official blog for this story at **agemintherough** on Tumblr. You'll find fan art, chapter commentary, an "Ask Section," and the official ePub and PDF for A Gem In The Rough! While you are there, you should check out our official artist's blog at **CyanideOreo** on Tumblr. You can also check out our **TVTropes** page under the name of A Gem In The Rough. Give it a read, add some things to it, and overall have a great time. Until the next time!**

"Ugh. Wha...What happened?" Genevieve asked herself as she opened her eyes. The painter found her chest and back throbbing in excruciating pain as well as a cold feeling. She had no idea where she was or what was happening. All she knew was that she needed to stop being disoriented and to fight through the pain. Maybe she could ask Steven to try his heali...

"Steven!" Genevieve groaned. Like a tidal wave crashing on the shore, the memories and events began to flood her mind. She remembered being on the sea train and getting assaulted by that World Government assassin. She remembered commanding Captain T-Bone and his men into battle before losing them completely. She remembered being in the same car as Steven...and then nothing else after that. "Wh-Where is Steven? Did we...?"

"Stop moving!" a high-pitched voice replied to her. "I need you to be still so I can inject this medicine into your arm!"

The comment caused Genevieve to nearly jump. Holding her hand

steady was Chopper, who held a syringe in his hands. Under her shirt, Genevieve could now feel bandages wrapped around her chest. An ice pack was discarded to the floor, the obvious culprit for her cold feeling. "How did I...where am I?"

"You're on a runaway sea train speeding toward Enies Lobby. Watch out," Chopper explained as he finished his injection. "That should numb the pain in a few minutes. I'd suggest for you to rest while you can. All of you were in terrible shape when we found you."

"All of us?" Genevieve repeated back.

The reindeer-doctor pointed behind him to the similarly bandaged forms of Petrea, Damian, Sanji, and the still-masked Usopp. All of them were moving around and conversing with the remainder of the crew, minus Steven and Robin. Among the familiar faces of the crew were several individuals Genevieve had never seen before, the majority of them wearing similar black armor. However, she recognized the train-lady and her granddaughter from when they had departed Shift Station the day before. Why they were there (especially the young girl), the painter had no idea. Regardless, Genevieve knew exactly what was happening:

This was a convoy prepared to go to war with the forces of Enies Lobby to reclaim their friends.

"How long was I out?"

"I can't say. We just met back up with the Franky Family after getting de-railed by Yokozuna. They found the car you guys were abandoned in...they also mentioned something about coming across another car too, but they abandoned it because it only had some weirdo in it. They really didn't get into it too much..." Chopper elaborated before getting cut-off by a loud scream of happiness.

"Genevieve! You're awake!" Connie Maheswaran cried, running over and giving Genevieve a hug. The action caused Genevieve great pain, but she took it. Connie was, along with Steven, one of her closest friends despite not knowing her for very long. She was a person who the painter was genuinely happy to see after a giant conflict...a conflict which she failed in. Noticing the wince on her

face, the girl let Genevieve go. "Oh! I'm sorry! I didn't think that..."

"Eh, forget it," she handwaved it.

"Is it true?!" Connie asked, looking her over. "Petrea and Damian... they were just in the middle of telling us everything you did yesterday and today. Is it true that you ate a Devil Fruit?!"

"Is it true you went on a date with Steven?" Genevieve countered.

The girl blushed, causing Genevieve to grin ear to ear. "I...we..."

"When all of this is over, I need every detail," the painter told her, her own cheeks flaring herself. She did not realize that she was doing this until Connie began to gasp. "Oh...yeah, that keeps happening."

"Your cheeks...they are tied to your emotions! That's so cool!" Connie squealed. However, the girl's smile quickly faded as she gave Genevieve a desperate look. "How...how is he? Sanji and Usopp told us he refused to come back...that he wouldn't leave Robin alone."

The comment caused Genevieve to slap her face in amazement. "Of course he would...if I knew he was going to do that, I would have at least given him what we picked up on Backslide..."

"What did you get him?" Connie asked.

"It's actually a gift for both of you. Where's that bag of yours?"

Connie pointed toward Petrea and Damian, who were still explaining what they went through together to the crew. Everybody who could fit in the car was crowded around as Damian was embellishing his own achievements, much to Petrea's embarrassment. "...and even though I got shot by Usopp, I got up just fine!"

"You guys saw Usopp?!" Luffy shouted. "Is he okay?!"

Outside of Chopper, every individual in the car slapped their head in embarrassment. Luffy and Chopper (who had just finished looking over Genevieve) were the only two people naïve enough to look at

"Sogeking" and not see Usopp standing right there. However, nobody wanted to insult Usopp by revealing this to Luffy, so they just ignored the question in the hopes that they would figure it out on their own.

"I did, young man. Usopp is safe...I believe I saw his parachute leaving the train," "Sogeking" explained.

"...did...did you just say 'parachute?'" Greg asked, clearly confused by the stupidity of Usopp's statement. "How does that make sense?"

"Grand Line," Peridot chimed in from the other end of the car.

"Just let him roll with it," Garnet whispered. "It's better this way."

"Ah," Greg nodded.

"Thank goodness!" Luffy sighed. "I didn't want him to be hurt!"

"That's right. Thankfully, he told me, the great Sogeking of Sniper Island, about all of your worries! I pledge myself to you and your cause, Captain Luffy! Do you know where Sniper Island is? It is within your heart."

"WOW!" Luffy and Chopper cheered, with the reindeer-doctor running toward the man. He quickly turned back toward Genevieve and wagged his hoof at her. "You're good to go, but when this is over, you need at least three days' worth of rest!"

"Aye-aye," Genevieve weakly brought her hand to her head, wincing ever so slightly in pain. "I can do rest very well."

"...I was in the middle of a story here..." Damian pouted.

"Here's the short, short version: we lost thanks to those CP9 freaks and now we are here," Petrea groaned, apparently getting tired of her partner's antics. "What do we do now?"

"It is quite simple: we need to devise an actual plan. Based on the abilities demonstrated by the members of this group, we can properly prepare ourselves for the coming conflict," Pearl answered, stepping forward to address the group. "Do you mind if I make

suggestions, Captain Luffy?"

"Uh...sure?" Luffy shrugged, not really paying attention as he was too engaged in Sogeking's cape.

"Wonderful. Given the immense power of the agents of CP9, those agents should only be handled by the members of our crew," Pearl began.

"I agree with the harlot," Paulie nodded. "If I have learned anything from watching you guys, it is that you are the only ones who can take these guys on. I suppose that leaves the three of us and the Franky Family to handle the scores of Marines and soldiers that will no doubt be in your way?"

"Bluntly speaking, yes. Now, we need to discuss the safety of the children and our non-combatants in this environment..." Pearl began, acknowledging Connie, Genevieve, Greg, Chimney, and Kokoro.

"Pearl, I'm fighting too!" Connie stood her ground. "I don't care what my mom thinks or anything along those lines. I have said it once and I have said it again, I am coming along!"

"Yeah! I didn't spend one hundred and ten million berries just to sit on the sidelines!" Genevieve added, her cheeks flaring red with anger. "We're in this together!"

Pearl looked taken back by the girls' outburst. She collected herself before restarting her suggestions. "No, you misunderstand me. I wasn't saying for you to stay behind. I was merely trying to point out..."

"Hold it. HOLD IT! I'm pausing you right there, Pearl!" Nami cut her off in an instant. The navigator had been somewhat silent as she had listened to Pearl's speech, but now her face was painted with a furious expression. "Did I hear you right?"

"I...I must express my confusion at..." Pearl stammered, unsure as to what Nami was talking about.

"Not you...her! Did. I. Hear. You. Right?!"

Genevieve blinked in confusion. She replayed her comments back in her head as she tried to even think about what could be setting off her navigator. "Uh...maybe?"

"Allow me to be clearer: *you paid one hundred and ten MILLION berries for your Devil Fruit?!'*" Nami ran her hands through her hair. "I thought you were using the money for essential items for the crew, not for personal gain! What the hell happened to that?!"

"I made that choice *TO* be more efficient for the crew, thank you very much," Genevieve pointed out, her cheeks growing redder both in size and hue. "I'm still going to use my brush and canvases for my personal art, but if we are in battle? My new powers will actually be useful!"

The navigator opened her mouth to argue before thinking about it. She was silent for a moment and then began to nod. "Okay...okay, I see where you are coming from. Fine, I suppose in the end it's...justified..." Nami gagged as she said the word in disgust. "Still, I just expect to be given the remaining amount for my troubles! That will make everything better!"

"That can be arranged!" Petrea chimed in with a cough, rifling through the bag's contents before pulling out a wad of bills. "Ten million berries with your name on it!"

The orange-haired teenager stared down at the money and then back at the chocolatier. She took it and counted it over, making sure it was the exact amount she had just been told. Finally, she began to chuckle. "Okay; that's cute. Where's the rest of it?"

"...what do you mean? This is all we had left," Petrea raised an eyebrow.

"All...you...had...left?!'" Nami repeated in growing frustration. She glared at the three former criminals with a sense of fury that would be spoken about for years to come. "JUST HOW MUCH DID YOU SELL THAT SHELL FOR?!"

The car was now silent as everyone knew to hold their collective breaths. Even those who did not know Nami could tell that she was

not a woman to be trifled with and those who did know her knew that if money was involved, things would end badly for whomever was at the opposing end of her wrath. As such, the trio began to gulp in unison. "...one hundred and eighty million?" Petrea offered.

"You...I...that..." Nami's eye began to twitch as she tried to comprehend that amount in her head. "Let me get this straight. You sold the eggshell pieces, the one that was taken from an egg larger than Merry, for one hundred and eighty million berries?"

"Uh...yes?" Petrea gulped.

"Just one hundred and eighty million?"

"...that's...that's right?"

"And for the sake of posterity, how much did we end up selling our Skypeian horde for?" Nami asked the other Straw Hats.

"Three hundred million, right?" Luffy chimed in, oblivious to his friends' impending fate.

"Yes, that would be it. Thank you, Luffy. I'm glad you were paying attention." Nami's mouth turned into a horrible smile as she returned her attention to the other three. "To put that into perspective, the gold which could FIT ONTO the ship was sold for a little under DOUBLE what you sold the pieces of the eggshell for, which I remind you was taken from an egg LARGER than the ship. Are...are you beginning to see where I'm going with this?"

Silence filled the air once more before the faces of the trio began to lose all color in them, even with Genevieve subconsciously trying to save face using her powers to prevent such a thing from happening. Fear took over as they realized what they have done: they roused the sleeping dragon by attempting to mess with her treasure horde. "...shit..." Damian whispered.

"'Shit' is what you are knee-deep into right now!" Nami started to fume before pausing once more, building the tension. "Wait, who ended up buying the gold?"

"Did...did you ever hear of a pirate named Mad Treasure?" Damian

gulped.

The name gave Nami pause, her eyes widening in fear. "Amazingly, yes. He's one of the fearsome treasure hunters in the world...he'd do anything to get his prize. He almost killed me once when I tried to steal from him...but that's beside the point. You're telling me he forced you to sell it at that price? Is that it? Please tell me that is what happened."

"Actually..." Petrea's face turned beet red. "I...er...suggested the price and he agreed to it? Honestly, he was perfectly...pleasant?"

The navigator took several deep breaths to keep her blood pressure from rising. Her face grew completely venomous as she took in the chocolatier's admission. As this was happening, the crew took several steps away from the trio to escape her wrath.

"I'm...I'm going to go check on Peridot's contraption!" Pearl announced, scurrying away quickly. "We can discuss our battle strategy at a later time!"

"I'll join you!" the others (save Zoro, who was too busy drinking to care) cried almost in unison, vacating the section of the Rocket Man they were presently in, giving the four of them complete privacy.

"By my count, this total should have been closer to seven hundred million...that means that you owe me five hundred and twenty million berries...FIVE HUNDRED AND TWENTY MILLION BERRIES!" the navigator shouted with sheer, unbridled rage. "*DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH MONEY YOU JUST THREW AWAY?!*"

"I...I didn't...how was I supposed to know that it wasn't a lot of money?!" Petrea tried to justify her choices, but Nami was not having it.

"BECAUSE OF COMMON SENSE! COMMON! FREAKING! SENSE!" Nami grabbed her by the collar and lifted her up in the air. "If you use your Devil Fruit powers right now, I SWEAR I will add thirty percent interest to the final total, prior injuries be damned!"

She dropped the former Baroque Works agent and pointed at each

of them individually. "For your crimes against common sense and monetary value, you had better get a move on. I may get happy and joke with you as we continue on after we save Robin and Steven, but know this: I NEVER forget matters involving money. I don't care if you live in Beach City or Water Seven; I expect results...in berries, not whatever currency you get paid in back there!"

As Damian and Petrea stood there dumbfounded at the demands the scariest member of the Straw Hats laid out for them, Genevieve weakly raised her hand. "Does...does me saying I wasn't there for the final negotiations make a difference at all?"

"You should have been there to keep them in line!" Nami quickly countered with a hiss.

"...I see," Genevieve gulped.

Left to their own fear, the Baroque Works trio found themselves shuffling behind an agitated Nami towards Peridot with fear in their hearts. It was very clear that they would not be getting off lightly when it came to how their navigator viewed money. Their mission was clear: pay Nami back or else suffer a wrath that was even more fearsome than Luffy at his deadliest. Internally, the trio collectively wept with fear. Externally, they tried to play it off and looked on as Tilesone was offering Peridot some of his ammunition.

"Are you sure you don't want any of these bullets? If you are trying to make an arm cannon or whatever, you need something to fire with..." he was saying.

"I appreciate the help, human, but bullets are finite. Energy propulsion blasts are infinite...provided I can find a self-generating power source! This limited material I have to work with...it's infuriating!" Peridot wailed.

"Kid, you brought a bunch of scrap onto this train and expected to make a weapon? Are you insane?" Paulie scoffed.

"No. I'm Peridot."

"That's not what I meant! You just can't build something out of

nothing!" Paulie retorted, pointing at the scrap mound.

"Nothing is always something, unless you are making something out of nothing," Garnet mused.

"YOU ARE NOT HELPING!"

"Am...am I missing something here?" Genevieve asked, finding her voice again. "What is going on?"

"Our resident Gem inventor has it in her mind that she can recreate those arm cannons that she had back when she kidnapped you from this pile of scrap," Petrea tried to explain the situation. "It's working just about as well as one would expect."

"Ah," the painter nodded before her eyes fell back to the bag the chocolatier was holding. "Wait...that's right! I never gave Connie what you guys got her and Steven!"

"Is it five hundred and twenty million berries?" Nami asked sharply.

"You know damn well it isn't..." Genevieve muttered, not wishing to incur her wrath even further.

Reaching inside of Connie's bag, Petrea fished out two Den Den Mushis. One had a salmon pink shell and the other had a light blue shell. She promptly handed the living phone to the shocked girl.

"You...you got me a snail phone!" Connie gasped, turning away from Peridot's hysterics. "Why?"

"You asked for something, and I quote, 'unique to the Grand Line,'" Genevieve explained. "That is what these two considered the perfect gift. I had to agree with them."

The young swordswoman examined her small snail and squealed with delight. "This is so thoughtful! I...I don't know what to say! Thank you!"

"Don't thank us. If we were any good at our jobs, the kid would be here to try out his with you," Damian scowled. "Damn it! We had him! Why couldn't we just get him to come with us?!"

"And why couldn't we have given him this before he left?" Genevieve added, acknowledging the salmon-colored snail in Petrea's hand while feeling regretful about Steven's situation once more. "We could have at least been talking to him right now..."

"If you idiots had given them that snail, it would have been found by those agents," Zoro pointed out, wiping away the sake from his lips as he promptly went back to ignoring everything.

"Wait, does that mean you were able to get my plant samples?" Chopper asked Petrea. The chocolatier nodded and took out the items he was looking for. The reindeer beamed with joy. "Excellent! When all of this is over, I can make some new medicine!"

"NONE OF THAT IS IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW!" Peridot screamed, snapping everyone to attention. "THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS IS MY INVENTION!"

"Actually, I believe that what is most important is to continue our plan of attack..." Pearl coughed dismissively. "I understand that you are playing with your little metal pile, but unless you can use any of this to teleport us directly to the others, I see no practical use for it."

"Hey! That's not true! This metal can be of great use to us! You are limited by your imagination! I mean, look at this organic communication tool!" Peridot countered, swiping the salmon Den Den Mushi away from Petrea. "Would you have expected this creature to have communication abilities? No! Would...wait...how exactly DOES this creature function anyway?"

"They speak to each other through radio waves once they are equipped with a receiver," Tilestone explained. "It's not that hard to turn a wild snail into a Den Den Mushi..."

"Radio waves?" Are the signals limited to only reaching one organism at a time?" Peridot continued, her eyes widening

"I mean...it depends on the model of the snail. As long as you know the Den Den Mushi you are trying to reach, you'll be fine."

"But what if...what if you don't know the snail?" Peridot's voice was

low and curious. It was clear that gears were turning in her head.

"Then you're out of luck."

The green Gem alternated her gaze between the Den Den Mushi, the scrap pile, and Luffy. The captain, oblivious as ever, did not notice what she was doing until she started laughing maniacally. "Uh...what's going on?"

"CAPTAIN! I HAVE AN IDEA! MAY I HAVE YOUR BLESSING TO DO SOMETHING POTENTIALLY RASH AND IMPULSIVE?!"
Peridot ran over and grabbed Luffy's shirt.

"Rash and impulsive is exactly what we shouldn't be right now!"
Pearl complained, pulling the Gem away from the rubber-man. "We need to focus our energy on the task at hand!"

"I KNOW!" Peridot grinned manically. "I CAN BE USEFUL! I KNOW WHAT WE CAN DO!"

"...you do?" Pearl curiously raised her brow.

"Yes! These discarded pieces of metal might not be enough to create a self-propulsion system, but I CAN use it to amplify and strengthen the frequency of these creature's communication capabilities! We can communicate with Steven and Robin that we are here to reclaim them...or even threaten their captors in order to secure their release before we deliver them a crushing defeat!"
Peridot explained as giddily as she could. "Doesn't that sound amazing?!"

The sound of the train moving on the tracks and the pounding of the storm outside was the only response Peridot received. The green Gem was disheartened at the lack of immediate praise to her suggestion, but it was clear that she was trying to keep face. Finally, it was Nami who broke the ice, her face clearly tired and exhausted. "Peridot, I know you are trying, but that sounds like...I'm sorry, it's not very smart or practical. Neither of them or that blue-haired weirdo have a Den Den Mushi on them. It wouldn't matter if you could do the things you want to do (which I highly doubt is even achievable); all it would do is give away the fact that we are coming

for them."

"And you don't think they already don't know?" Peridot countered. "Steven always sings about how those clods always save the day, right? Why would today be different? They HAVE to be anticipating us. All this would do is circumvent the need for fighting! We could try to end this peacefully through a calm discussion with some very real and thinly hidden threats directed toward them."

"That still won't..." Nami began before getting cut-off by Luffy.

"Okay. Go for it," Luffy told Peridot, giving her a thumbs up.

"WHAT?!" Nami screeched.

"THANK YOU!" Peridot jumped for joy. "THANK YOU, CAPTAIN!"

"What part of that sounded like a good idea to you?!" Nami scolded Luffy as Peridot went back to work with her scrap pile, requesting Connie's Den Den Mushi to utilize as well as Steven's.

"She's happy," Luffy shrugged. "This is her way of helping. Besides, I'm going to kick all of their asses anyway if they don't give us back our nakama. If she can get them back to us faster, why not?"

The navigator opened her mouth to argue before realizing it was a futile gesture at best. Finally, she rubbed her temples and pointed toward Pearl. "Please...please keep going with your game plan..."

"Gladly," Pearl bowed. "Now, Connie...I know you wish to engage in combat against our foes, but I implore you to take a less...active role in the combat. I doubt your mother would approve of you being so reckless..."

"I'm sorry, Pearl, but I'm going to be the first face Steven sees when we get him back. I know my limits, you've helped me see to that, and I will be mindful of them. However, this is not the time or place for holding back. I'm here for him as his knight...his jam bud!" Connie announced to the Gem.

"YEAH! JAM BUDS FOR LIFE!" Luffy and Chopper cheered in the background.

Pearl attempted to shoot them a dirty look but merely sighed, her face looking weak as she did so. "When Dr. Maheswaran finds out about this, I want it on record that I made an attempt to stop her..."

"The dangerous renegade Pearl who once terrified Homeworld soldiers has met her match in the form of a doctor-lady," Garnet folded her arms and smirked. "How amusing."

"I have NOT met my match!" Pearl countered sharply.

"If you idiots would stop squabbling like hens, we can get back to the point at hand!" Paulie barked. He held up a piece of paper and waved it around. "It occurred to me that we can't very well have a plan if you don't even know what you are getting into. Thankfully, I've been to Enies Lobby before, so I know the basic configuration of the island."

On the paper, there was a drawing of the island just as Paulie stated. It showed the train's current position, which was near an iron fence. Behind the fence was several drawings indicating main buildings with a gate on the backside of the island. Drawing his finger along the map, he began to explain his current idea for invasion. "This back here is the Gates of Justice. If any of our targets make it past here, we can consider them dead. You can only get there by going through this building here: the Tower of Justice."

"May I see that?" Pearl asked, examining it in closer detail. She stared quizzically at a black circular section surrounding the buildings. "This black part...what is that exactly?"

"A giant waterfall. Don't ask me how it works, but it is a sight to behold. As such, stay the hell away from it," Paulie warned the group. "Look, let's be real here: the only people who have any real chance of beating these guys are you all. You Straw Hats have strength and abilities that we don't have...we might be strong, but compared to you? We are just cannon fodder."

"That's an unfair assessment!" Connie spoke up. "You guys are not just cannon fodder! You are here to risk your lives for your friends! That has to stand for something!"

"Girlie, I'm not putting us down or doubting our abilities. I have no doubt the sixty or so of us can handle the thousands of Marines and World Government agents on that island. We just know that CP9 is going to be on a completely different level than what we are at."

"He's right. We'll head on ahead of you guys and clear away the stooges on the island. You guys should wait about...five minutes?" Zambai added, looking to Paulie, who nodded. "Five minutes before using the Rocket Man to launch over the Main Gate right behind the fence."

"Why don't we join these guys? This will be a piece of cake if we were Sugilite or Sardonyx...or especially Alexandrite!" Amethyst shouted out. "It makes sense!"

"I have no idea what that means, but you guys have been beaten to hell and back tonight. The less needless fighting you engage in, the better," Paulie countered.

The purple Gem cocked her head in confusion. "But...but we'd have no problem fusing! It's seriously so easy to do and would save us time!"

"And it would reveal to our opponents our trump card," Garnet added, who was nodding. "If we want to reclaim our allies, we need to show some patience. If we fuse too early, it would give our opponents the chance to counter it. We need every advantage we can muster to win the day."

"Okay!" Luffy shouted. "Let's do it!"

At once, the combined alliance began to nod with approval. It was clear that the group finally had a game plan in place to storm the island. However, it became clear that there would be no further time to discuss such matters. Kokoro, seizing the moment, directed their attention to island in the distance. They were almost there:

Enies Lobby was in sight.

"Look at the back of the island!" Kokoro ordered the rag-tag band of pirates, carpenters, and shipwrights. "Those giant gates that dwarf

the island are the actual Gates of Justice. They never open completely, just enough to fit any prisoner being sent to Impel Down. Behind that door is a death trap of Sea Kings, which makes it impossible for ships to travel across. How the Marines do it, I have no idea. What I do know is this: you kids need to get your act together and save your friends, because if they go through that gate, you'll never see them again. Nobody has ever broken in and out of Impel Down and I advise you not to be stupid enough to try it! Right, Straw Hat?"

Luffy did not acknowledge the elderly woman. As it turned out, Luffy was no longer in the train car, but rather had jumped all the way to the iron fence itself. As the entire car descended into madness trying to figure out just WHY Luffy, who had acknowledged a moment ago that the plan was to wait five minutes before engaging in fighting, had decided to seemingly take on the entirety of Enies Lobby's forces singlehandedly.

"I...I don't even know what to say," Pearl just smacked her face in amazement.

"Hoping he would was was pointless," Nami signed.

"Luffy just can't wait five minutes..." Sogeking commented. "It's not in his nature."

"You could figure that out about him by knowing him for less than two hours?!" Chopper gasped, alternative between looking shocked at Luffy and shocked at Sogeking's abilities to read people.

"So...what do we do now?" Genevieve asked, clueless on how to proceed beyond absorbing the moment of Luffy jumping towards the biggest battle of his life into her head to paint later.

"Now we wait...and then it's our turn," Garnet answered. "Go get them, Pirate Captain Luffy. We believe in you."

GWMAPT

Enies Lobby was quite the extravagant place for young Steven Universe. Never before had Steven seen a place that was so

unique, and he had seen Amethyst's room. To describe Enies Lobby was something the youth could barely do, for its splendor was something to behold. From the giant gate that was taller than any Gem structure he had ever come across to the courthouse that should have sent shivers down his spine.

However, Steven was too in awe to be afraid.

This was something Steven wished to use to his advantage. On one hand, the youth was only fourteen and was positively terrified of the fact that he was technically a criminal who was caught and could potentially be thrown in jail. On the other hand, he needed to stay positive and strong for Robin, whom Steven could tell needed him more than ever. She was doing her best to avoid acknowledging him, but Steven would break through that tough resolve as soon as he could.

It was shocking to him that he was not as amazed at the concept that the island not only was apparently always sunny, but that it was positioned in the middle of a waterfall that spilled over into an unknown black void. Where it ended, Steven had no idea. However, it reminded him quite a bit of Pearl's room, which featured similar waterfalls. Franky, on the other hand, had to be silenced by the guards escorting him as he would not stop talking about how unnatural it was.

It took ages for Steven and the others to arrive in the main building where Steven presumed the mysterious director of CP9 lived. Nearly every time Steven had tried to speak, Lucci shot a glance at him. It was a glance that caused him to practically gag almost instantaneously. As such, he kept his simultaneous exhaustion and awe to himself and prepared for what would happen next.

When he was finally directed inside of what was apparently the Tower of Justice, the three prisoners were led toward a giant door that the members of CP9 entered into by themselves, leaving two agents of the World Government and Captain T-Bone (who had been returned to his regular self again, although somewhat hurting from the earlier confrontation) to keep watch over the condemned. Both Robin and Franky kept their heads down and were silent. Steven, being Steven, would not have any of that and decided to

engage in some lighthearted conversation.

"So...isn't this such a cool-looking island? I mean, I know we are in handcuffs and stuff, but I can still take the time to appreciate the smaller stuff! What do you guys think?" Steven asked, hoping to inject some levity in the moment.

"Steven, I think you don't understand the severity of this situation," Robin muttered bitterly, her eyes fixated on the floor. "Now isn't the time for joking."

"But...but it's so pretty? It can't hurt to look on the bright side of things and..." Steven began before a furious Robin cut him off.

"STEVEN! THIS PRETTY PLACE COULD KILL YOU! DO YOU UNDERSTAND THAT?! THIS IS NOT A JOKE AND NOT A TIME TO JEST!" Robin yelled at the youth. "YOU NEED TO KEEP YOUR HEAD DOWN AND TO STOP TALKING!"

The harshness of her words cut at Steven like a knife into his heart. He had never thought that Robin could feel such anger...anger undercut by pain. This was something Steven could not ignore. "Well, you need to stop trying to do this alone!"

"I WANT to be alone, Steven! You and the others need to stop acting like you know what I want!" Robin shot back, still refusing to look Steven in the eyes.

With that, Steven moved himself directly in front of her and forced her to look at him in the eyes, ignoring the World Government agents who were moving in to make sure he did not try anything. He could see a redness that she was trying to hide, one of tears that she had held back. It was clear to Steven that she was resigned to her requested fate of being captured...but she did not want the same for him. "Robin, I can't let you be alone...not while you're like this. I won't stop until you realize just how good you have it! I..." Steven paused and began to think about how he would proceed. 'If this is going to work...' Steven thought to himself. 'I need to pull out the big guns.' He took a giant breath and prepared his secret weapon: a song. "*A hand for each hand is planned for our worlds. Look how our fingers reach!*"

"The hell?" Franky commented, his eyes snapping open unexpectedly.

"Steven..." Robin bit her lip out of frustration.

"A prisoner singing...how interesting," Captain T-Bone mused, curious to hear him while not being controlled by a young girl.

"Millions of grains of sand in our worlds; it's never a lonely beach!"

"Stop it..." Robin commented.

"You have my voice to answer yours back. I have two shoes that click to your clack! You're not alone in our worlds!"

"STOP IT!" Robin screamed, her face no longer red from holding back emotion but rather with forced rage.

With that, the door to the room CP9 was congregated in opened and the ever-punctual Kalifa was there, adjusting her glasses and glancing at the trio. "For prisoners, you are making an awful lot of noise out here. That could be seen as sexual harassment."

"What does that mean?" Steven innocently asked, his expression quickly hiding his sadness over Robin's continued efforts to shut him out.

"It means that your presence is requested inside this room. Captain T-Bone, you are dismissed. We will take it from here."

With that, the trio were lead from the hallway into the room. Steven did not know what to expect upon crossing that threshold, but he secretly held onto one, lasting wish:

'Maybe the director of CP9 won't be as bad as Robin thinks he is? Maybe he can make Robin realize that she is worth living?'

GWMAPT

Five minutes is a long time to wait for most people. A lot could happen in that time.

For five minutes, Luffy had been taking out wave after wave of Marines and World Government agents...over five hundred of them by the end of that time frame.

For five minutes, the combined forces of Galley-La and the Franky Family had been clearing a path for the Straw Hats to take so they could achieve their goal.

For five minutes, the tension inside of the Rocket Man could be cut with a knife. There was much pacing going on as Pearl kept walking back and forth, eager to begin the coming battle. Nami was fidgeting with her Clima-Tact, trying to make it work. The Baroque Works trio fretted about having to repay their large debt. Peridot toiled away with the three Den Den Mushis aboard the train (the two provided by Petrea and the one left to Nami by Sanji). Zoro, for his part, was sitting outside on the front of the car, with Garnet and Yokozuna.

"Okay! The first test is about to begin!" Peridot announced, strapping her final contraption on Steven's Den Den Mushi. "Steven's father, hold Nami's miniature communication snail so I may attempt reaching another device that it does not know!"

"Anything to make the time go faster," Greg commented, accepting the Baby Den Den Mushi with somewhat reluctance. "This isn't going to, like, hurt this thing, is it?"

"Doubtful...but it would make for some interesting data if it does...any progress is good progress!" Peridot cackled to herself. "Still, I haven't got enough of a charge to amplify this signal globally...but perhaps the small charge we have could be enough for the small radius of the land mass..."

"...is anyone else worried about her doing this?" Sogeking asked, looking concerned for the Den Den Mushi. "I have seen many things on Sniper Island that would frighten lesser men, but even this is a bit out there for someone with my experiences!"

"Please, masked-human. I know you don't know me or my expertise, but I assure you I am a very capable inventor."

"Ugh...all of this science talk is hurting my brain!" Amethyst

complained. "Can't we just, you know, do this already?!"

"Amethyst, my alarm hasn't gone off yet," Connie mentioned, pulling out the flip phone she had programmed minutes earlier. "Just be patient."

"Being patient sucks!"

Thankfully for her, the alarm on Connie's phone did finally ring. It was a song that was dear to the young girl: the song that Steven and Connie first fused to. Silencing her alarm and putting her phone into her bag of holding, Connie clutched the sword of Rose Quartz and prepared for the next step of the plan. As she did this, Amethyst did come cartwheels to amp herself up even more for the task at hand.

"Alright, kids! It's time for our part to play! By now, the Gates should be open so it will be clear sailing from here!" Kokoro announced. "Samurai-guy, take out the iron fence when we get to it!"

"Leave it to me!" Zoro could be faintly heard outside.

"WOO-HOO!" Amethyst cheered. "LET'S STORM THIS JOINT!"

On cue, the Rocket Man began to move faster and faster toward its destination. The plan was simple: Zoro would cut the iron fence and the Rocket Man would make a clean sweep through the first gates where they would move the rest of the way on foot. Assuming nothing would go wrong, it was almost foolproof.

Of course, things are never that easy for the Straw Hat crew.

"Everybody, there's a slight change in plans. Zoro wants everybody to grab onto something and hold on!" Kokoro announced to the unsuspecting pirates.

"What the hell does that mean?" Sanji asked in a panic. "What's wrong?!"

"We have a small problem...the guys didn't get to open the main gate," Kokoro admitted.

"WHAT?!" everyone cried at once.

"WE'LL HIT THE GATE!" Sogeking wailed.

"WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?!" Chopper panicked.

"Everybody, just try and remain calm!" Pearl tried feebly to keep order. "This is just a minor setback..."

"PEARL, NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO SUGARCOAT THINGS!" Nami screamed.

Outside, Zoro looked confident as the train sped toward the iron fence that surrounded the island. He let out a single chuckle. "Don't worry, everyone. There's always a way."

The swordsman nodded toward the giant frog sitting beside him. "HIT THE FENCE WITH EVERYTHING YOU'VE GOT, FROG!"

Acknowledging his request with a croak, Yokozuna hit the fence. The action caused the fence to bend at a ninety-degree angle, allowing the train to ride up it. Before anyone knew it, the Rocket Man was now airborne. The Marines and Government agents below were shocked at the sight of a flying, runaway sea train.

"GARNET, SHOOT THE GATE WITH YOUR ROCKET PUNCH!" Zoro ordered.

"Understood! **ROCKET-POWER GAUNTLET PUNCH!**" Garnet cried out, shooting her knuckles directly at the closed gate.

While the gauntlets met their mark, it soon became apparent that the attack was superfluous. Because of the angle of the ascent into the sky, the Rocket Man was no longer on a collision course to make it through the gate. Instead, they were now flying over it.

"Oh. This was unexpected," Garnet dryly commented.

"Yup," Zoro agreed.

"I'm going to assume you have given no thought to where we are going to land," Garnet assumed.

"Yup. I'm leaving it to luck," Zoro folded his hands across his chest.

"Ah," Garnet nodded, adopting the same pose. "Bring it on."

Inside of the train, the mood was decidedly less calm and collected approach to the situation. As one could possibly expect, practically everyone was panicking in several different ways.

"IF WE CRASH INTO THE GROUND AT THIS SPEED, WE MIGHT NOT WALK OUT OF THIS TRAIN IN ONE PIECE!" Connie screamed.

"GAH! I CAN'T SHATTER LIKE THIS! NOT BEFORE I MAKE MY DEMANDS TO RELEASE OUR COMRADES!" Peridot clutched Steven's Den Den Mushi as tight as she could.

"WE ARE ALL GOING TO DIE!" Damian wailed in fear.

"WHAT?! WE ARE?!" Chopper exclaimed, clinging on the bomb-man's leg.

"WOO-HOO!" Amethyst cheered with delight.

"NAMI-SAN, BURY YOUR HEAD IN MY CHEST! YOU'LL BE SAFE THERE!" Sanji took the opportunity to flirt.

Surprisingly, there was only one person who seemed not to have turned to either excitement or sheer terror. Petrea, after looking around at her friends and staring out of the window, stared at her own hands. She took one giant breath and put her hands on the train's wall. "**One Kilo!**" she whispered, closing her eyes as she tried to focus.

The train, while still descending toward the ground, now seemed to glide along the air like a paper airplane instead of plummeting aimlessly. Petrea did not dare look at her handiwork as she did not want to lose concentration and cause the weight of the train to plummet it, dooming them all to a fast death. Still, the chocolatier could hear well-enough, taking in the gasps and sighs of relief from her friends with pride.

"I can do this...I can do this..." she huffed and puffed to herself. It

was one thing to change the weight of some equipment or a bag full of gold. Changing the weight of a train was completely different and required intense concentration.

"AHH! WE ARE GOING TO CRASH INTO A GIANT!" Sogeking screamed out.

"What?!" Petrea asked, opening her eyes and looking out the window.

Sure enough, the train was about to collide with a random, World Government-affiliated giant that happened to be in the way. It became apparent that there was no point in attempting to glide the train further along in the sky at a lesser weight. If they crashed into the giant with a train only weighing a kilogram, the machine would crumble like folded paper. However, if the train hit the enemy at its full weight at a plummeting speed right as it was about to collide, the train had the better chance to come out on top.

Doing just that, the train struck the giant in the back, knocking him out and allowing the train to crash into the ground of Enies Lobby. While damaged and beat up, the machine was still structurally intact. The only issue was the disappearance of the three individuals who were riding on top of the train: Zoro, Garnet, and Yokozuna. The three of them, unprepared for what had just happened, had flown off upon impact with the giant around the crash site.

Zoro, for his part, got up as if nothing had even happened and walked toward the smoking train, ignoring the swarming Marines and Government agents who were gathering their wits after seeing the Rocket Man land. The first pirate to make himself known after him was Sanji, who lit a cigarette and gave a small nod at his friend. "Another fine mess you've gotten us into, shitty moss-head."

"Wouldn't have it any other way," Zoro said as he gripped his swords. "Everybody else alive?"

"Of course," Sanji motioned toward the train. The familiar faces of Pearl, Amethyst, Connie, Damian, Petrea, and Nami were now coming out of the train. However, standing between the two pirates and the train were their now-aware opponents. Without even saying

a word, Zoro and Sanji plowed through them, incapacitating them with ease.

"Look! It's that bounty hunter stooge who answers to 'Straw Hat' Luffy!" one of them shouted before getting cut down.

"Ha! He called you a 'stooge!'" Sanji laughed as he delivered a kick into an oncoming Marine.

"At least he knows who I am!" Zoro retorted.

"SHITTY MOSS-HEAD! WHEN I GET MY BOUNTY, IT WILL BE TWICE YOURS!" Sanji argued, now focusing his aggression directly at Zoro instead of his enemies.

As the two bickered, another individual picked themselves up after the crash landing. She grabbed her head in disorientation, unsure of where she was or how exactly she survived the landing.

"Ugh...wha...what happened?" the raspy voiced Gem groaned.

"What did we even hit? I...wait. What? I'm me?! WHERE'S SAPPHIRE?!"

Ruby, the eternal ball of flame that she was, jumped up immediately from the ground and began to scan the area for any sign of her beloved Sapphire. As she scanned, Ruby put together the pieces of why she was here alone instead of fused together as Garnet: without her Future Vision guiding her, Garnet was completely blindsided to all things that couldn't be determined by fate. Zoro placing his faith in the safety of the crew by leaving it to chance had caught her off-guard enough to cause her to defuse into Sapphire and Ruby upon impact.

Now she had to find her opposite on a literal battlefield.

Ruby began to run toward the Rocket Man, prepared to knock back any Marine in her path. As she moved closer, she saw several men with guns and cannons pointing at the Rocket Man as Chopper and Usopp made themselves known by the train. As Zoro and Sanji we're still arguing and the others had begun thinning the herd of enemies themselves (while it appeared as the Franky Family and Galley-La shipwrights watched in awe and amazement from nearby,

their own fight interrupted by the Straw Hats' presence), Ruby took it upon herself to save the transportation (especially since she was unsure if everybody had managed to escape from there yet, including Kokoro and Chimney). She created her gauntlet and went charging at the men. Her fist was a ball of flame and her plan was to send a first punch toward them to draw their fire. As a Gem, she could easily withstand their attacks if they avoided her gemstone.

Ruby lined up her shot to attack them with everything she had. However, she was beat to the punch by an intense wave of cold. It was only when the most beautiful voice in Ruby's world cried out "**Frozen Flurry!**" that she knew everything would turn out just fine. The sudden drop in temperature caused the soldiers to stop their aiming, dropping their weapons to try to get themselves warm.

Warmth was something could provide.

"Flaming Fury Fist!" Ruby cried with all her might, punching the air so the flames emulating from her gauntlet could be shot at them while their guard was down.

The now-burning officers and officials began to scurry away in a panic, giving Ruby a view of her goal: Sapphire, speeding over to the Rocket Man to assist Peridot (who looked frazzled as she clutched onto the Den Den Mushi she was using for dear life) and Greg (who just plain looked frazzled) out of the train. "RUBY!" she cried out in joy as she left the two of them and sped over to her better half. The two shared a quick embrace and gave each other their customary look-over. "I wasn't expecting...I never would have guessed that I would be seeing you again so soon...especially in a place like this!"

"You know, maybe we should try not using Future Vision more if it means I get to see you for just a moment," Ruby winked, causing her and her significant other to blush profusely. "I loved your attack name."

"Yours was cuter," Sapphire commented.

"No. Yours was," Ruby countered.

"Hey! Less flirting and more fusing!" Nami, who had been watching this unfold in shock and disbelief, shouted. She quickly took her new Clima-Tact and began to create clouds in the sky. "I'm going to use my 'Cool Ball' and 'Heat Ball' to make a smoke cloud in the air...wow! This new Clima-Tact is much faster than the old one!"

"If she's doing what I think she's doing..." Sapphire mused before grabbing Ruby close to her.

"...then let's get to it, shall we?" Ruby winked.

At that moment, Nami shot a "Lightning Ball" into the cloud. The cloud began to spark and in an instant, lightning rained down on all of the combatants on the battlefield. Unfortunately, this also included the Straw Hats. A stray lightning bolt was about to hit a cowering Greg, but he was saved by the only being outside of Luffy who could handle a lightning bolt directly in the chest.

"Garnet!" Greg gasped. "I thought I was a goner! What the hay was that about?!"

"I think Navigator Nami is still working on some bugs in her weapon," Garnet explained, acknowledging how Nami was now strangling Sogeking for how her "Thunderbolt Tempo" nearly electrocuted their friends. Chopper, who was nearby, was very confused as to why Nami was taking out her anger on the masked-man as it was technically Usopp and Peridot's fault.

Peridot, for her part, was clutching her device. It appeared to have been struck by Nami's lightning as well. Unlike the frazzled Greg, Peridot looked absolutely gleeful. "THAT SEEMINGLY HORRIFYING BOLT OF CONCENTRATED ELECTRICITY MIGHT HAVE DONE IT! MY DEVICE HAS A CHARGE! SUCESS FOR PERIDOT! I WILL ATTEMPT COMMUNICATION POSTHASTE!"

In no time at all, the Straw Hats began to congregate together (some fighting over getting hit by lightning). As they collected themselves and began to survey the situation they presently found themselves in, the Franky Family could not help but watch them with admiration. In the few short minutes that the Straw Hats were there, they had witnessed Nami call down lightning, Ruby and Sapphire fuse, Zoro

and Sanji taking our opponents without batting an eye, Damian shooting bullets that were unlike any they had ever used, Amethyst gleefully subduing anyone who dared cross her path, Connie and Pearl fight side by side together, and Sogeking tripping over a stray Marine that happened to find his hiding spot. To top it off, a nearby building began to collapse, showing everyone exactly where Luffy was presently causing trouble. They were causing all of this mayhem just to get back two of their own...

Who were these pirates?

GWMAPT

The room where the members of CP9 were in was rather large and intimidating. It reminded Steven of an old castle, open with seating in the center. There was a giant window facing all of Enies Lobby and a series of couches that brought some warmth to the otherwise sterile-feeling room. Toward the back there was a desk with an odd emblem on it. It appeared to be two lines coming together to make a "plus" sign, with circles placed at the edges of the lines and one in the center.

However, Steven was drawn immediately to CP9. While Steven had already become familiar with some of them, there were four new faces that Steven had never met (as well as an elephant, which Steven instantly thought was the cutest thing he had seen on the Grand Line in a long time). One was a large man wearing white makeup with long pink hair, another was a larger, round-shaped man with green hair and a zipper for a mouth, and a third was another man with black hair, a long mustache, a goatee, and had his black shirt open to reveal a muscular chest. The fourth person, however, was the one that Steven was the most interested in.

Unlike the others, he wore an odd mask (that seemed familiar to Steven) that covered part of his face. He had pale skin and wavy lavender hair. He was the only one standing (besides Kalifa, who promptly sat down upon leading the prisoners inside) and promptly began to laugh maniacally when he saw his prisoners for the first time. "Words cannot express the joy that I have right now! Look at you all now! Cutty Flam, I'm amazed you are still alive after the last time we met! And look! We have with us the most dangerous woman

in the world! This is too perfect! That leaves us with..." the man paused as he gazed upon Steven. "This is him? This is the half-Gem that I've heard so much about?"

"It's him, Director Spandam," Nero spoke up. He looked miserable sitting in the same room as Lucci. Regardless of how he tricked him into getting captured, Steven still wanted to help him out, but there was nothing Steven could do for him at that moment. Right now, he was here to be there for Robin. If he could help the World Government, maybe they would let her go?

"Yes, sir," Steven bowed. "I'm half-Gem. My mom was a Gem and my dad's a human. My name is Steven!"

"I don't recall asking you to speak!" Spandam raised his voice. "You'll be doing plenty of that in time, boy. I have a great many questions for you, but now is my moment to reflect on what can be considered the most important day in modern history! The citizens of the world will never know how noble and great our work will be this day! Sure, they won't know about it for several years, but that's just what the Gorosei want. I think those old fools are tepid with their ideals of Justice! Sacrifices are necessary for the peace of the world...MY WORLD!"

Steven did not like the ranting and raving of this man. He was sounding more and more like a character from a comic book than as a member of the World Government. If he was acting this odd now, what exactly was his reason for wanting his presence?

"IT IS RIGHT AND GOOD TO KILL ANY FOOLS WHO STAND IN OUR WAY ALL IN THE NAME OF WORLD PEACE! PIRATES, FISHMEN, GEMS...ALL TRAITORS AND LOWLIFES WHO DO NOT COMPLY WITH MY VISION WILL DIE AS WELL!" Spandam gloated.

"YOU BASTARD! TOM SACRIFICED HIS LIFE TO PROTECT HIS BLUEPRINTS FROM LOWLIFES LIKE YOU!" Franky snarled, taking the opportunity to leap at Spandam. As his hands were bound, he bit the side of his face and chomped down as hard as he could.

"HEY! HELP! ASSISTANCE NEEDED, GUYS!" Spandam wailed out in pain.

In a flash, the agent with the pink hair subdued Franky. Steven couldn't even keep up with how fast he moved. Still, he was happy that the man had stopped his speech. He seemed so angry and full of hate. Maybe Steven could help him get past that so he could try to bring peace to the world in a better way?

"Thank you, Kumadori. It seems as if you are still feisty as ever, Cutty Flam. I swear, if I knew from the start that you were the one with the blueprints, I would have saved myself the trouble and arrested you for your past crimes when I first met you!" Spandam spat at Franky, who was on the floor. To punctuate his disliking of the cyborg, he kicked him in the face. "Iceburg, on the other hand, was too smart for his own good. He single-handedly united every shipyard in Water Seven and began to be the premiere contractor for the World Government. By hiding his hatred for the World Government, he managed to block any chance we had to investigate him for HIS involvement with Tom. By the time he became the mayor, he was practically untouchable...until the winds of opportunity blew my way and I learned that Nico Robin and several 'Gems' were heading toward Water Seven on a pirate ship!"

He paused for a moment to see if all eyes were still on him. When he determined that they all were, he continued. "It seemed too good to be true. The one woman who could read the Poneglyphs and remnants of the tribes of legend that the Gorosei fear all coming to me? It was perfection!"

"'Tribes of legend?'" Steven repeated, utterly confused as to what he was talking about. "I don't..."

"Once I had some coffee and thought about what needed to be done, everything fell into place. I already had the idea of pulling in our new recruits to secure an audience with a Gem. Between Apollo's power, Nero's lust for violence, and Hecca's impressive way of blending in, I knew they would have no issue with proving themselves to me. Granted, Nero here had an issue with you, Cutty Flam, but there is no need to dwell on that. Here you are, in my grasp! My other agents masterfully reworked their plans to include

manipulating Nico Robin, and what do you know? It worked! I not only have been given authority from Admiral Aokiji to summon a Buster Call if necessary, but I have the two people who can summon the Ancient Weapons here and a descendant of the fearsome Gems as a secret weapon! The world is practically mine for the taking at this point! Life and death is literally in the palm of my hands!"

"Why would Admiral Aokiji give you authority to summon a Buster Call? And for that matter, what do you mean when you call the Gems a legendary tribe?" Robin asked, her curiosity seemingly coming out despite still not showing any sign of coming around to Steven's optimistic side.

Steven was not expecting Spandam's response, which was to punch his friend in the face. The audacity of the move sent shivers down Steven's spine and caused him to immediately tear up in fear. 'This man...why? Why would he hit Robin?!

"DON'T YOU DARE ASK ME QUESTIONS, YOU DISGUSTING CHILD OF OHARA!" Spandam shouted, ignoring Robin's question in favor of getting out some aggression. "You should be grateful I actually am giving you a reason to validate your existence. Without me, you'd be better off dead!"

"Hey! Is this thing working?!" a voice called out from the next room over. The voice was not one Steven had heard yet during his extended stay with CP9, but it was oddly familiar.

"Who the hell is that?!" Spandam shouted, furious that his speech was interrupted again. "That Den Den Mushi is my private line with my father...how did somebody call it and how did they get it to answer without any of us picking up the receiver?! One of you get me that Den Den Mushi so I can get some damn answers!"

"That's sexual harassment," Kalifa pointed out as she went to grab it for him.

"AND YET YOU ARE STILL THE ONE GRABBING IT?!" Spandam was incredulous. "What isn't sexual harassment in your eyes?"

"Hello?! Testing! Evil CP9 humans?! Are you there?!" the voice grew

louder as Kalifa brought over the device. Steven still couldn't quite put his finger on whose voice it was and it was clear Franky was confused as well, but a quick glance over to Robin showed something that she hadn't displayed since arriving here: emotion.

She clearly knew the voice and was shocked by what was going on. If this was something that could finally snap Robin out of her depression, then this was something that Steven was grateful for. He did not much care for the current situation the two of them were in, but he did not want to see his friends get hurt. Still, if he kept his ears open, he might be able to figure out something that he could use to his advantage...

"Thank you!" Spandam snatched away the Den Den Mushi. "You! Who is this?! How did you reach this number?!"

"Hello?! Is this the evil humans from that secret group who took Steven Universe, the Jasper-cyborg, and Nico Robin?" the voice asked, seemingly confused and unfamiliar with what she was doing.

'Wait...she knows my name?' Steven blinked in surprise.

"HOW DID YOU KNOW THAT?!" Spandam roared. "START TALKING NOW OR ELSE I WILL ARREST YOU FOR TREASON!"

"Ah, it seems I pinched a nerve. Wonderful! Nyehehe!" the female voice gave a slight chuckle. "Now that I have your attention, allow me to introduce myself! I am the great and powerful Peridot and you have two people that are most precious to me in your possession! I want them back!"

"Peridot!" Steven whispered excitedly. He had not heard or seen the others since before his blowout with the Gems.

"What the hell? That little green kid?" Franky cocked his head in confusion.

The head of CP9 merely stood there in shock as he took in her request. Finally, he started to laugh with all of his might. "Oh, this is rich! You dare to call MY line and make requests of me?! How did you get this number?!"

"Your primitive snail communication device was simple enough to figure out. All I had to do was find out how to access the specific radio-wave frequencies they communicate on and hijack it. I didn't know how to access your device specifically, so I sent out a universal broadcast in the hopes of reaching you. I was fortuitous in being able to acquire a large surge of energy, which was enough to ensure that I would reach you," Peridot's voice displayed a bit of pride in her tone. "I knew it would work."

"'Universal'...what? What are you even talking about?!" Spandam stammered. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I think that means that she believes that this conversation is being broadcasted everywhere, sir," Kalifa adjusted her glasses.

"Ha!" Spandam resumed laughing. "Not even Vegapunk could devise something like that! Besides, what is to stop someone from picking up the line? You are bluffing, Miss 'Peridot!' I...wait," Spandam stopped and thought about it for a moment. "That name...you're one of them, aren't you?!"

"One of what, deplorable human?" Peridot snapped back.

"A Gem! It has been so long since you all resurfaced, but here you are! The legends are becoming reality! Why would you come out of hiding just to challenge me and the might of the World Government itself?!"

"'Hiding?'" Peridot repeated blankly. "I wouldn't necessarily call parading ourselves on a pirating vessel 'hiding.' Regardless, I have already told you my reasons for calling you. At this very moment, our captain is destroying your base of operations. We will call him off if you adhere to my request: return Steven Universe, the cyborg, and Nico Robin to us or else be destroyed. That is all."

"'Straw Hat' Luffy is here?" Blueno asked.

"Eh," the agent with the goatee shrugged. "He's only taken out about five guards or something...he's nobody."

Blueno remained silent as he watched his boss get even more

irritated at the talking snail. "You...you idiotic, inferior rock creature! You dare make requests of me?!"

"I do dare! I dare to risk my life for my friends and I know my companions feel the same way! I implore you yet again, for Steven's sake. Please release them to us and I assure you that you will survive this encounter unharmed."

"Unharmed?!" Ha! Have you considered with whom you are dealing with?! You have foolishly revealed yourself to me and have brought yourself to one of the most fortified areas in all of the Grand Line! Your little captain is already falling to our military might! Do you truly think you could break into Enies Lobby?! What chance do you have against the greatest Marines and World Government officials we have to offer?!"

"Logically? I'd say our chances are rather high. I can see absolutely no way of you succeeding in stopping us if you decide to attempt the futile gesture of direct combat."

Spandam blinked several times and looked at the Den Den Mushi like it were a foreign object. Steven could not imagine what was going on in his mind, but he knew what was going on in his own. The Straw Hats and Crystal Gems appeared to be mounting a rescue mission to save him and Robin from the World Government. It was a noble gesture, but Steven was not sure if it was the right idea. If they did this, hundreds of innocent Marines could get hurt. They were just doing their jobs. Besides, he still had hope he could talk sense into those "Gorosei" people Spandam had mentioned. The Gems might not care to meddle in the politics of this world, but Steven would gladly do so if it meant saving lives and keeping the peace.

Still, the fact that this was PERIDOT leading the charge was surprising and refreshing. Where had this come from? Peridot enjoyed Robin's company, true, but this was different. She was thinking and acting on her own...

What had happened since he stormed away?

"Are you nuts?! Have you lost your mind?!" Spandam was beside

himself. "I knew the Straw Hats had attempted a rescue mission earlier, but you're still persisting?! You and your little friends are going to die horrific deaths and it will all be your own damn fault! Give it up now while you can! I may let you live if you cease further communication and leave!"

"I refuse to abandon them! Ever since I came into existence on Homeworld, I have been told what my purpose has been. I have always been Peridot Facet-2F5L Cut-5XG : Certified Kindergartener. I came to Earth to check on the status of the Cluster...and yet...things have changed. I have changed!"

"What are you talking about?" Spandam asked, clearly confused. He was not alone. Nearly all members of CP9 either looked confused or uninterested. The goateed man and Apollo were the only one who seemed truly interested in the story, though Kumadori was starting to dramatically cry.

"I am talking about me! At first, I was against coming here to your Grand Line, as I thought that it was distracting us from our goal to terminate the Cluster to ensure the survival of the planet Earth, but I am so much better off for it! Steven might have been the first individual to treat me with respect and even kindness, but it was Nico Robin who took me under her wing! She took the time to show me common decency, something I have never experienced before on Homeworld!" Peridot sounded so full of life. It was causing Steven to tear up with joy. "Both of them are very dear to me and I refuse to see you treat them as shamefully as you are!"

"I could give two shits if these two ingrates mean anything to you! They and Cutty Flam are nothing more than threats to the World Government, as are you! I will give you this offer only once: surrender yourself to me and I will show you mercy. Oppose me and I will gut you like a fish!" Spandam adopted an evil grin. "What do you say, 'Gem?'"

The Den Den Mushi was silent for a moment. The leader of CP9 turned to his prisoners and began to laugh. "Do you see how easy it was to get her to realize how worthless you are? Not even your friends will stick up..."

He was cut off by the familiar voice of Peridot returning to the conversation. "I was asked a serious question once that I have been thinking about for several days now. Do you know what that was, human?"

"No! Nor do I care! Does this have anything to do with your surrender?" Spandam sighed, clearly growing tired of this conversation.

"The question was 'what do you fight for?'" Peridot pressed on. "On Homeworld, we don't have dreams or ambitions. We are told what to do, and I accepted that without question. But watching the life on our version of Earth and your Grand Line...it forced me to realize that I am something more than that. I'm not fighting to be a king like the captain is or to be a permafusion like Garnet is...I am fighting for them! I am fighting for the Earth and the creatures that live there! I am fighting for my close acquaintances...for my friends! My dream is to be the best friend I can be to the individuals whom I care about and you are standing in the way of my dream!"

"You call THAT a dream?! What a pathetic dream! It is almost as pathetic as your desire to challenge me. I grow tired of asking this, so this will be the last: will you surrender peacefully?!" Spandam shouted.

"Nyhehehe," Peridot giggled. "I should be asking you the same question!"

"Do you have a death wish?! The odds of you even getting here are so minuscule that you'll easily die trying! Even if you somehow made it to us, you'd face the full authority and might of the World Government!"

"I defy your authority and I defy your statistics!" Peridot barked back. "The odds might be against me, but that means nothing to me! It won't be easy, true, but I'm not going to do this alone. I am a Crystal Gem! I am a Straw Hat pirate! I am your friend, Steven Universe and Nico Robin! I suppose I also care about you, cyborg, but not as much since I know nothing about you...save the fact you look suspiciously like Jasper, which is not necessarily a good thing, but still! Do you know what I have learned about both of those groups?

They always save the day, especially from clods like you!"

"You'll try...and you'll die for it! Your friend might have made it through the storm, but I doubt your luck will be that good again! He's having difficulty with only five of the government's best officers! What are you and the rest of your pathetic little band going to do?" Spandam mocked her.

"Nyhehehehe! Only five? You stupid clod, have you even looked out of your viewing screen? Have you even glanced at our handiwork?" Peridot asked him.

"Handiwork?' What are you...are you...are you..." Spandam trailed off as he actually bothered to look out to look out to the rest of the island from his office. What he witnessed was enough to have him drop the Den Den Mushi to the floor. "Is...is that smoke?!"

"You took our friends...we are taking them back! Peridot Facet 2F5L, Cut 5XG signing out."

Spandam looked down at the discarded Den Den Mushi and picked it up. His hands began to tremble as realization set in. However, it quickly subsided and a grin appeared on his face. "What's foolish Gem. Did she really think that I would believe that a lone pirate could cause so much damage by himself? If he had done that, I'm sure I would have gotten a call on my own personal Den Den Mushi. They might have brought some kind of help, but we can squash them like the bugs that they are. Blueno, get to that damn courthouse and assess the situation. We can still show them the full power and might CP9 has to offer!"

"Yes, sir," Blueno nodded, creating one of his doors and walking through it.

"What are our orders?" Nero asked, clearly eager to get back into the group's good graces. "Are we going to assist Blueno before the situation gets out of control?"

"Oh, my dear rookie. You still do not understand the power of your allies. Blueno can decimate all of the Straw Hats in one swift stroke. I would rather have the rest of you here to witness the momentous

occasion that you see before you." He stared over at Steven and Robin and proceeded to throw the Den Den Mushi at them. "I hope you appreciate that everything that is about to happen to your friends is on your head! They could have left you both to die, but instead they would rather come to me for a slow, agonizing death. How does that make you feel knowing there is nothing they can do but die?!"

Steven prepared himself to appeal to Spandam's better judgement, but to his surprise, he was beaten by Nico Robin, who had only before seemingly given up the will to live. "YOU...YOU PROMISED THAT THE STRAW HATS COULD LIVE! YOU CAN'T DO THAT!"

"Really? I did? Lucci, what was the exact wording of our arrangement with this monster?"

"That Nico Robin would turn herself in to our custody if we allowed the members of the Straw Hat crew to sail away from Water Seven," Lucci commented.

"How true. Isn't it thankful that the Straw Hats have already sailed away from Water Seven? They sailed right here," Spandam told her calmly. "It's the same with your friend right here. Gems are not recognized as citizens of the World Government as they are not believed to exist! The word of the World Government can only apply to its citizens...which this child is not."

"You...would you really twist my words like that?!" Robin asked, shocked at his actions.

"There's no point in arguing with his piece of crap. He has no humanity left," Franky spat at him. "Your rock friends are more human than these clowns will ever be."

Robin, realizing how helpless she truly was, began to nod. "You...you're right. You...you all might think that the Gems can't save the day, but they always find a...a way. That's why...why I believe in them."

"Then you are as much of a fool as you are a waste of life!" Spandam proceeded to kick her and Franky in the face, causing

Steven to attempt to rush to her aid. He was held back by Lucci and found himself unable to move or to use his Gem abilities. As such, he watched every, forceful kick that Spandam used on his friend. "I don't need to justify my behavior or my humanity to scum like you! You are criminals! I don't need to honor any agreement that I have made with you! Do you truly believe that a woman like you who has spent her life betraying others has the right to choose how she and her friends die?!"

Steven was in shock. Despite the overwhelming desire he had to cry with joy at the prospect of Peridot making a stand on her beliefs and declaring their friendship as the reason behind it, he found himself crying over the helplessness that he felt watching the sight unfold in front of him. Robin and Franky were getting pummeled into a pulp for seemingly no reason. Why couldn't he stop him? Why was Spandam doing this? Why were there such terrible people in the world?

And why was Robin just taking it? Did she seriously believe that the Straw Hats were coming to save them or was this just her attempt to get under Spandam's skin? Either way, Steven was not about to let Robin deal with the consequences of her actions alone.

"From now on, you and your friends will know suffering that will make you wish you have died many times over! I'm going to torment you, use you, abuse you, and then throw your broken corpse into the sea! THAT IS WHAT YOU DESERVE! THAT IS WHAT YOUR EXISTENCE IS WORTH!" Spandam gloated as he pummeled the defenseless woman.

"No!" Steven cried out, squirming as hard as he could. "I won't let you hurt them! I...WON'T!"

In a flash, Steven finally managed to use his bubble, knocking Lucci aside. The half-Gem ran in front of Robin and Franky, blocking Spandam's blows despite still being bound. The director was taken back by the brazen display. "Do you truly think your pink ball will hold up against my best agents?!"

"No, but I won't let you hurt Robin...hurt me instead!" Steven begged him. "She's suffered enough!"

"That's enough of that," Lucci walked over and prepare to strike the bubble out of existence.

"Steven...no! Don't do this! I'm not...I'm not worth it!" Robin coughed weakly.

"You're worth it to me," Steven smiled.

Spandam, seeing Robin's pain and fear all over her face, began to laugh sadistically. "You care about this brat, don't you?! Oh, psychological scars are almost as fun to inflict as physical ones! Lucci, our young captive here has a point. It will hurt Nico Robin far more to watch helplessly than to be hit herself...it's better this way."

In horror, Robin watched Steven drop the bubble and before he knew it, Steven began to become subjected to the most painful feelings he had ever felt. Blow after blow stuck his body and he felt blood drip down his face. In the end, however, it did not matter.

A blow struck to him was one less blow that Robin would face.

"Sir, do you think that it is possible the Gem was telling the truth about that conversation?" Apollo asked Spandam once he finished beating Steven around like a rag-doll. "There is no other way that she could have called you...is there?"

"Please! That was an intimidation tactic to frighten me. My own Den Den Mushi didn't go off, so you have proof right there that she was bluffing! That scum is nothing but a minor obstacle at this point. If they make it past the courthouse, then they will die. If they don't, we still have these fools and they are still dead. Either way I win!" Spandam began to laugh, leaving Steven barely breathing on the floor while still not looking over to his own Den Den Mushi for more than a second (for if he had done so, he would have learned that the sole reason WHY he did not receive a call was due to the its receiver still off the hook, blocking Peridot's call all together). "Don't worry either way! Inform the men to prepare for a slaughter in the name of true Justice!"

"What about them?" Kaku asked, acknowledging the prisoners.

"As I don't believe our young friend here is able to answer any questions himself at this moment, I think it's time for him to be properly introduced to Agent Hecca. Prepare him for mnemosurgery!" Spandam cackled maliciously.

GWMAPT

Little did Spandam know that what he dismissed as boasting was far from it. Across the Grand Line, countless of pirates and military officials listened in as their Den Den Mushis played them the conversation between the two individuals. From rookie pirates just setting out on the high seas to Supernovas who had started to making names for themselves to even the four pirate crews whom the world considered to be emperors of the sea, all had heard Peridot verbally challenge Spandam's authority. For most, the concept of Enies Lobby getting assaulted was impossible to consider. For others, the concept was something they would drink to in the hopes of watching the world collapse in the chaos of such an action.

But others took the message in a completely different way.

"Commodore! Commodore, have you been listening to the Den Den Mushi?!" a certain bespectacled female cried as she ran to her superior.

"What the hell are you talking about Tashigi?" Commodore Smoker asked his subordinate, getting up from his chair where he was reviewing some paperwork. "Do we have orders from the brass?"

"No! The Den Den Mushi...it just started going off! I didn't even pick up the receiver...it just started taking...all of our Den Den Mushis started talking!" Tashigi explained in a desperate, angry, and yet concerned tone as she guided him toward the nearest Den Den Mushi. "I couldn't figure out where I heard the voice at first...but then it clicked!"

Smoker was going to make a remark at the ludicrous nature of her comments, but he stopped talking when he got in earshot of the mollusk telephone. What he heard was enough to make his blood boil.

"How many days are we away from Enies Lobby?" Smoker asked as calmly as he could.

"A week...maybe two weeks? Sir...why? Why is Peridot here?! Why does she seem concerned about Steven?! Isn't she supposed to be bubbled?!" Tashigi asked, fear written on her face.

"A better question is what the hell is the kid doing in the custody of CP9?! Get the men together. We are setting sail to Enies Lobby immediately!" Smoker growled, leaving the ensign to rally the troops.

"Sir, you want us to invade Impel Down?! That's treason!"

"No. There's no way we would make it there in time and I'm not about to forswear my duty as a Marine. No, there's no need for that. If that damn Peridot is there and the Universe boy is there, then it stands to reason that both the Crystal Gems and the Straw Hats are there as well. I never would have believed it before, but if there is any chance of the kid getting free, those Gems are it. Him being captured is a perversion of Justice...one I expected after seeing his bounty and talking to the Gorosei," Smoker barked, preparing to return to his quarters.

"But...but why? Why then?"

"We aren't going there to mount a rescue mission. We are going there to arrest that damn Straw Hat for child endangerment!"

With that, Smoker slammed the door and walked over to a certain book that the Commodore had been reading for the past month with great interest. He put his hand on it and sighed, frustrated beyond belief at the situation that was apparently unfolding in Enies Lobby.

"Damn it, Universe. What the hell do they want with you?"

GWMAPT

"This is unacceptable," an elderly man in a very specific place told four of his companions. "It is one thing for a stronghold like Enies Lobby to be compromised...but to be revealed to the world in such a manner?!"

"Calm down, Elder Ogata," another elderly man with grey dreadlocks commanded. "There is much good to come from such a revelation. Consider the device that was being utilized. Upon capture, we can determine how to recreate it and mass produce it for our troops..."

"At what cost, Elder Noda?! Now that the ability to reach the world using such a tool has been invented, what is to stop another inventor to attempt it themselves?! There will be chaos and disorder in our world...disorder that can not be contained!" Elder Ogata snapped.

"And that is why we must stop the problem at the source," a third man with birthmarks on his bald head and a large white mustache chimed in. "This 'Peridot' has revealed herself to be a larger problem than we considered any ally of the Straw Hats to be."

"Elder Hirano is right. This is the proof we needed that the Gems of old are revealing themselves again..." Elder Noda nodded. "We must consider how to approach the situation as we watch the events unfold at Enies Lobby. We must put our faith in our agents to do what they always do."

"Do you believe that CP9 can keep these pirates at bay?" Elder Ogata asked the group. "Do they have what it takes to stop Garp's grandson and bring us the Gems that dare oppose us?"

"They have to...for CP9 is representative of the World Government's might. To doubt the World Government is to doubt us...and we should never be doubted."